

Under the Surface

by YappiChick

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Summary: Cortana, Earth's first human-AI hybrid, has just been assigned to work with the Master Chief to try to stop the Covenant who threatens to destroy those who will not follow them. AU/Pre

Halo:CE John/Cortana

1. Stomping Grounds: Part 1

****Updated (3/12): Author Notes:** So, after nearly a year, I decided to go back through and reedit the fic. Most of the sections are basically the same-minor dialogue tweaks, random spelling corrections, date changes, etc. However, there are some major changes in certain sections. Most significantly, there is an entire new part entitled, "Playing Defense" which helps tie in certain plot aspects especially with the sequel I'm planning to write. The end of "Let's Get This Show on the Road" and the beginning of "Pushing the Boundaries" have been completely rewritten.

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****Original Author Notes:** First things first, this story is a major AU. Everything takes place on Earth (though in the same time frame). No aliens or space battles here. If that sort of thing bothers you, then this isn't the story for you. There are about a thousand or so nods to Eric Nylund's incredible "The Fall of Reach" novel. And a huge thank you goes to the good people at Halopedian.**

****Secondly, this story IS finished. I plan to post a new section every other day.****

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><p>North America, Reach UNSC Military Complex,
Omega Wing-Section Three secure facility
>December 12, 2551

Today was the day that would mark the change in the fight against the

Covenant.

Today Cortana would be partnered with Spartan-117.

It had taken three months for ONI and High Command to approve the armor upgrade for the Spartan. The opponents argued that advancement was expensive and risky; if it failed, the UNSC would be unlikely to recover from the investment. But, after hearing both her and Halsey's persuasive testimonies, the admiralty, led by the influential vote of confidence from Lord Hood, finally green-lit the project.

Unlike the slow moving bureaucracy of High Command, once the permission had been granted, Cortana and Halsey had worked quickly to move the process forward. It had taken Cortana less than a half a minute to decide on her Spartan counterpart and nearly as long for Halsey to agree. The paperwork had been rushed through and Spartan-117 had been removed from his current team and transferred to Reach.

Now, Cortana was getting ready to do her part to complete the project.

The Master Chief was in the lab with Halsey already, getting accustomed to the first set of upgrades on his armor: a new shielding system, an onboard data storage unit that rivaled most ships in the fleet, and an advance HUD.

But that was nothing compared to the second half of the upgrades, she thought with a smirk.

"Cortana." Halsey's voice cut through her thoughts. "We're ready for you now."

She looked at her reflection in the window and straightened her short, black hair, pulling it away from her face. Satisfied, she turned away and walked inside the doctor's lab.

"This is Cortana," Halsey said, stepping to the side as she entered the room. "She is part of the upgrade to your armor I mentioned earlier."

Cortana took in the sight of the Master Chief before her. He had been fitted in his armor, though he hadn't yet put on his helmet. His short brown hair matched his cocoa colored eyes. There were several scars on his cheeks and neck, a testimony to the amount of time he had been fighting the Covenant. He looked serious, unshakable. He was every bit the professional soldier Cortana believed him to be.

There was no doubt that he was the right choice.

She watched as his eyes flickered between her and Halsey, no doubt noticing the similarities between the two women.

She stuck out her hand for him to shake. "It's good to meet you, Chief."

"Likewise, ma'am," he said as he shook her hand.

"Cortana," she corrected.

"Cortana," he repeated uneasily. He looked at her ONI issued uniform for any signs of rank, but found none.

"I'm a fourth generation AI," she said as way of explanation.

The Chief looked her, confused. "But you're human..."

"I am," Cortana answered, amused by his awkwardness. She turned to Halsey. "You didn't tell me how observant he was."

She noticed how the Spartan stiffened at her dig. She was tempted to apologize, but decided against it. He would have to adjust to her personality if this partnership was to work. If he was expecting someone who fit the UNSC mold the way he and his fellow Spartans did, he was in for a bit of a surprise.

"You'll have to forgive, Cortana. She's a bit more...high-spirited than you," Halsey quickly interjected. "She is a human-AI hybrid, the first of its kind. This allows for her, when working with your armor, to be in two places at once. We're going to implant a shard of Cortana's matrix chip into your neural interface, John. Her core programming will be able to communicate directly with your armor and its data while allowing her to remain mobile. We believe that with the two of you working together, it will allow for us to access more of the Covenant databases, to try to get ahead of them."

Cortana frowned at the mention their long-standing enemy. The Covenant, the zealous cult that had started off so small nearly forty years ago had grown into humanity's biggest threat. They controlled nearly seventy percent of the world's land mass and dominated over two-thirds of the world's population. Those that didn't join their forces were killed ruthlessly and mercilessly.

The UNSC, the United Nations Salvation Collation, were the only major force in opposition to the group and even they were fighting a losing battle. Over the years, the UNSC lost dozens of strongholds to the Covenant. The only promising signs that the UNSC would ever be able to stand against them were Halsey's Spartans. Now, with Cortana joining the fight, humanity had its best chance of stopping the Covenant from gaining any more ground.

The Chief looked at Cortana with grim smile, bringing her thoughts back to the present. "Understood, ma'am."

"We're going to proceed with the coupling process. John, please finish putting on your armor and have a seat," Halsey instructed.

He grabbed his helmet from its position on the metal table and placed it over his head. When the locks clicked into place, he raised his visor. He was still watching her closely, Cortana noticed.

She watched as the Chief sat in the large chair, allowing Halsey to have access to the back of his armor. She wondered if he understood what the link would mean for him, that no matter where he was on the planet, a part of her would be with him.

She stood in front of John and flashed him an encouraging smile.

He looked at her blankly.

Briefly, she wondered if he was perhaps a little _too _rigid for her personality.

Cortana turned around to face the doctor who seemed unconcerned with the Chief's stolid behavior. She trusted Halsey. The doctor wouldn't risk the project failing. If she thought there was going to be a compatibility issue, she would have brought it up to the AI before getting this far.

"Look forward and do not move. I will tell you when the procedure is complete," the doctor said from behind him.

"Are you ready?" Halsey asked, glancing at Cortana.

Cortana nodded. According to the simulations they had run, she should feel nothing more than a faint energy drop as the shard reconnected with her matrix chip inside her body. Once the shard was recognized by the Chief's armor, it would allow her to have a direct window to what the Chief saw.

She watched as Halsey carefully removed the shard that was suspended in a matrix chip from its cylinder-shaped holder. She heard several clicks as the chip slid into place in the Chief's armor.

She felt a tug in her consciousness as the shard reached out to connect with her neural lace. "All right, I've got it," Cortana said. "Activating MJOLNIR interface now."

She stumbled slightly as the huge influx of data came roaring into her matrix. Quickly, she created a buffer between her and the Chief's armor, allowing the data to flow in at a more easily digestible rate.

Halsey looked at her questioningly, but Cortana waved off her concern. She would be fine.

She switched her subroutines and transferred her primary system into the shard. It felt strange for her to be confined in the small matrix chip after being in her host body for the past several months. But, she adapted smoothly and accessed the armor's systems. "I'm in." Cortana's voice came from his helmet speakers.

When the Chief turned to face the human sitting next to him with an inquisitive look, she waved. "Please don't be surprised at my ability to do more than two things at once," she quipped.

"Excellent," Halsey murmured, taking notes. "And are you getting the readings from all the armor's systems?"

"Yes," Cortana said, distracted. She accessed his vital signs during the procedure. He had nearly lost consciousness when the shard was implanted into his neural lace.

Had they missed anything else in the simulations?

"She's in my mind?" The Chief's voice pulled her back into the discussion.

"That's up for debate," Cortana said, transferring her main systems back to her matrix chip and allowing the normal subroutines to work

in the shard. "My subroutines will transfer your neural impulses and transfer them directly into motion. So, in that regard, yes, I'm in your mind."

"But," Halsey interjected, "she will only be able to perform those actions when you are in your armor. When you are not in it, the shard will be no more intrusive than any other part of your neural lace."

The Master Chief shifted his gaze to Cortana briefly before looking back at the doctor. "I feel a hum in the back of my head. Is that normal?"

Cortana exchanged a glance with Halsey. Yes, there was a chance that he would "feel" her presence, but the doctor had assumed the sensation would be minimal at most.

The doctor looked unperturbed. "That is to be expected. When you're not in your armor, Cortana's chip will be nothing more than a hum in your subconscious, like your heart rate or your breathing patterns. It might take time to adjust, but soon you won't even know she's there," Halsey assured him.

Cortana raised an eyebrow at the doctor, surprised at how confident she seemed. While it was true that they had no evidence that there wouldn't be any lasting side-effects of the link between the two of them, the truth was she and the Chief were entering into untested territory. No one knew what the long-term effects of the connection would be. Not even Halsey.

"Now, if the two of you would follow me, High Command had arranged a little...test before they give you the final green-light," Halsey said, leading them out of the medical room.

Cortana frowned slightly. Why hadn't she known about this?

"And you thought giving up a thirty-second advance warning would help the cause?" Cortana asked sarcastically.

Halsey didn't reply to her comment. She picked her tablet off the desk and led them to the door. "Follow me."

2. Stomping Grounds: Part 2

****Updated (3/12): Author Notes: No major edits for this section.**

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><p>John didn't know what to think of Cortana.<p>

She was certainly different than any other officer than he had ever worked with in the UNSC. She wasn't a soldier, but she seemed to command the respect of people around her. To John's surprise, there were several officers inside the ONI building that saluted at _her _when they left the facility.

They loaded into the waiting transport. Halsey took the passenger

seat, next to their driver. Cortana sat next to him in the back seat and flashed a quick smile. "Gotta love how cozy these things are."

John didn't reply.

The rest of the ten minute journey was relatively quiet. Cortana had a far-off look for most of the drive, only occasionally looking away from the direction they were driving to give John an appraising glance.

What was she thinking?

John didn't have time to ask his question out loud. Once the Private made the last turn, the training facility that he had become intimately acquainted with during his early Spartan training came into view.

The Labyrinth.

Its thirty foot walls stood before them, silently daring John and his new partner. Even with his fellow Spartans working together, the obstacle course was a challenge. It had several terrain obstacles, including a twenty foot cliff and a half mile of rocky, rolling hills and a set of caves and underground pathways where the instructors would plant surprises for those recruits that rushed into the room too quickly.

"_Little _test, huh?" Cortana said, raising her eyebrows.

Halsey didn't reply immediately as they disembarked. She held her tablet close to her as she escorted them to the lone bunker in front of the entrance.

"Cortana will remain at the instructor bunker at the entrance and guide you through the course, John. None of the surveillance equipment that it normally at their disposal will be available to you. You will rely solely on your neural link with each other to communicate. At the end of the maze is a bell, John. Ring it three times and the test will be complete," Halsey explained.

She lowered her voice slightly as she leaned forward. "Be cautious. I think Ackerson has some tricks up his sleeve."

Cortana rolled her eyes. "So basically be expecting anything sleazy and underhanded. Got it."

John frowned. _No one_ spoke about their commanding officer in such a way. Even if Cortana wasn't technically a UNSC soldier, he couldn't say he was comfortable with how she treated the chain of command.

If Halsey was bothered by her outburst, she made no outward signs of showing it.

"Your test will begin twenty seconds after Cortana enters the bunker." She looked at John. "You have been authorized to use whatever force is necessary to eliminate any threats you may encounter," the doctor said. Her eyes moved between both of them before she nodded. "Good luck." Then, she walked away.

"Thanks," the AI said dryly. Cortana glanced at the Labyrinth and scowled. "So, Chief, ready for a challenge?"

"Yes."

She looked amused at his resolve. Her lips twitched in a half-smile. "All right. I'll get myself in the bunker and give you the signal when your test will start."

"Understood."

He moved to the entrance as Cortana walked towards the bunker. A feeling of uneasiness washed over him. Going into the Labyrinth unarmed was almost suicidal. But, that was his instructions, so he would have to wait for the opportunity to arm himself once the test begun.

"All right, Chief. Time to dazzle High Command."

John sprinted inside the course, knowing that the eighty foot cliff face would be his first obstacle to contend with. Normally, he would approach the siding with caution and a weapon, slowly taking out any sniper threats that may be hiding in the vantage points around him. But now, unarmed and unable to help himself from such a threat, John knew his only course of action was to get up the cliff face as quickly as possible.

He dug his fingers into the jagged rock and started climbing to the top. He pulled himself up, ignoring the sound of his heart racing. He needed to stay focused on getting to the top. As he reached the top third, he heard a gunshot being fired. Cortana wouldn't have time to warn him which direction it was coming from; John would have to rely on his intuition to help him survive.

Several feet above him, he saw a jagged rock jutting out. Without considering any other options, he pushed off the foothold and propelled himself upward. The fingers of his left hand held on to the rock as he threw his weight upwards. The bullet hit the cliff face just several inches from where he was.

John knew he needed to get up to solid ground quickly. Hand over hand, he climbed the rest of the cliff. As he was pulling himself up, he heard the sound of a half-dozen guns being cocked.

"Watch out, Chief."

"I've got it." His voice was confident.

When he stood up, he became a blur of motion. The first unfortunate soldier who was in his path was knocked out cold by an elbow in his face. John swooped down and grabbed the assault rifle and slammed the butt of it into the chest of an ODST who was starting to take aim at him. He spun around and fired two quick shots at the Marine that was running in his direction, hitting him in the shoulder.

John kicked away his gun as the fallen soldier attempted to reach for it. He ducked out of the way of a barrage of bullets that another ODST had fired several yards away. He managed to dodge most of them, but several of them hit him.

He watched on his HUD as the shield levels started to drop.

"The point of the new shielding system isn't to see how much damage you can take before the power completely drains."

John pressed his lips together at Cortana's flippant remark. Was she going to give a running commentary in his head throughout the entire test?

He fired several shots in the direction of the ODST. The bullets hit their mark and the man slumped to the ground.

Only two more to go.

He picked up the smoke grenade that the Marine had dropped and threw it in the direction of the remaining soldiers. In the midst of the confusion, he barreled through and incapacitated the two men.

"Not bad for a Spartan."

He didn't reply as he made his way past the unconscious men and took the extra ammo with him. He slowly turned a corner.

A plasma grenade landed at his feet.

He sprinted to a safe distance and waited for the blast from the projectile. The ground shook beneath his feet as the grenade exploded.

"RPG, obviously. Actually" she said, as he slowly started making his way back to the corner, "_there are four grenadiers on the wall."_

John frowned. He was going to have to outrun the grenades that were being aimed at him. Maybe Kelly could complete such a feat, but he was nowhere near as fast as his longtime friend.

"Don't worry, Chief. I've got you covered."

Suddenly, he felt like his entire brain was doused with ice cold water. His vision blurred, a wave of vertigo washed over him. He lurched forward as dark spots swirled in his vision, but managed to stand upright.

_"You felt that?"_She seemed slightly surprised.

"Yes," he replied uneasily. Was there something wrong with their link?

The pain started ebbing away. "_Do you feel anything now?"_

He checked. There was nothing there except for the slight hum that he had experienced since the shard had been implanted.

"No."

_"It seems like you feel the PSI wave shift when I access your armor. We'll have to work on a buffering system when the test is finished, but, for now, I'll keep the link at its current intensity. We can't have you blacking out in the middle of the test, can we?"_She paused

for a moment. _"I guess that means I won't be able to sneak into your subconscious now."_John could almost see her smirking.

Doctor Halsey hadn't said anything about her being able to access his subconscious thoughts. "I didn't think-"

"It's a joke, Chief," she said. "_I transferred my primary system into your shard. With the increased speed, you _should_ be able to sprint down the straightaway before they have a chance to fire any grenades off,_" Cortana replied.

John didn't like how she said "should" but there was little else he could do. Not finishing the course wasn't an option.
"Understood."

He inched his way to the corner, knowing that all eyes down the path were on his location. He drew a deep breath and started sprinting as fast as he could. He raced down the narrow road; he had never moved so quickly in his life. He rounded the corner and leaned against the wall, his chest heaving.

His rest was short-lived.

A Rhino was waiting for him in the open area before her.

The Chief looked at the bulky tank. One blast from its turrets would kill him instantly, even with his new shielding system.

"Looks like you've got some trouble, Chief."

3. Stomping Grounds: Part 3

****Updated (3/12): Author Notes: No major edits for this section.**

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><p>Cortana watched helplessly as John moved to a more discreet location in the shadows of the large wooden pillars, the only cover in the wide field. "I would suggest using a couple of those plasma grenades you snagged earlier to make quick work of the Rhino," she said, her voice deceptively even.<p>

She frowned as the feed from his visual sensors started flickering. Something wasn't right.

"Can-und-pl-rep," came the broken response. Then, the video feed from his armor stopped completely.

Damn, Cortana swore silently.

Ackerson must have set up a scrambling channel. With a burst of annoyance, Cortana hacked into the UNSC database and found the frequency Ackerson was using. She tried to disrupt the signal, but the colonel had put a reinforcement emitter in the course. Unless it was physically dismantled, the link between her and John would continue to be interrupted.

Cortana weighed her options. She could remain in the instructor's station and attempt to contact the Chief, hoping that he would be able to piece enough of her transmission to understand her message, or she could enter the course and find the source of the problem herself.

No, she finally decided, she would play -and win- by the rules that Ackerson and ONI had set up.

She sent a brief message to the Chief, detailing what he was to look for and destroy in order to get the signal working properly. Ackerson knew what he was doing, she admitted grudgingly. The Spartan couldn't backtrack to the location with grenadiers on the wall, waiting for his return. Before he could even attempt to destroy the emitter, he would have to disable the Rhino.

Thirty long seconds passed with no change. She could still access his vitals -which were still strong- and know how much damage he had taken -a relatively small amount- but the impulse to run in and take care of the problem herself was pressing on Cortana.

She forced herself to ignore the feeling. The Chief was more than capable of demolishing a small piece of equipment. Another minute went by. She started pacing in a tight circle, wondering if the Chief would be able to decipher enough of her message to know what he needed to do.

"Cortana?"

The AI relaxed.

The video feed flickered for a second before being fully established.

She allowed herself a brief smile. "I'm here, Chief." No sooner as she transmitted the message to him, she heard a loud single shot coming from the west.

It took less than a fraction of second for Cortana to identify the sound as a shot from a DMR. She almost warned the Chief about the incoming projectile, but she realized it wasn't fired at the Spartan.

No, the bullet was headed _her_ way.

She knew based on the speed of the bullet, she wasn't going to be able to avoid getting hit. Swiftly, she shifted and ducked. Fire tore through her bicep as the bullet ripped through her flesh. She hissed as she looked down and saw the blood oozing from the wound.

_So, that was how Ackerson wanted to play, she thought bitterly.

The pain was intense, but manageable. The blood was steadily trickling down her arm. She would tend to her wound, but first, she needed to take care of the threat. She pulled out her pistol from her ankle holster as she analyzed where, exactly, the bullet had come from.

There.

A tiny black speck, the only sign of the sniper, was on the horizon. She adjusted her aim slightly as the calculations to make the perfect shot filtered in her systems. The pistol wasn't the best weapon for the job, but she was left with no other options. The sniper wouldn't miss the shot a second time.

She fired.

She leaned back as she waited for the black dot to fall to the ground. Two seconds later, the bullet had hit its mark. It wasn't a kill shot as Cortana was painfully aware of the dwindling number of troops in the UNSC. If Ackerson was foolish enough to order another sniper to take her out, however, Cortana made no promises as to their fate.

Now that the threat had been taken care of, she quickly shifted her attention to John who was removing the extra ammunition from the fallen ODSs.

Confident that the Chief was doing fine without her immediate assistance, she focused on her injury. She took off her jacket, wincing as the rough fabric pulled across the wound. Quickly, she made a tourniquet around her arm while keeping sensors alert for any more of Ackerson's surprises. When she finished, she grimaced at the sight of her left arm; her uniform had been tainted with blood, her hand stained scarlet.

There would be time to think about her injury -and payback- later. For now, she shifted her attention to the Spartan inside the course. She accessed all of the information coming over the feed: the Rhino was several yards away, smoke pluming out of the main cabin; three ODSs were lying on the ground, writhing in pain.

The Chief walked across the now-secure field and approached the entrance to the underground portion of the course.

It was pitch black in there.

He was about to turn on his helmet lights and step inside the corridor when an uneasy feeling settled over Cortana. Ackerson had something planned; he knew not powering the lights in the underground corridor would not be an issue for the Spartan.

"Hold on, Chief."

He stopped instantly.

Infrared and night vision sights hadn't shown any threat, but Cortana wasn't willing to take any risks. She needed to make sure that the Chief made it through the course safely.

"Throw a grenade in the marked position," she requested as she uploaded the location to his HUD.

He hesitated briefly, undoubtedly wondering why she would make such a request. But, he remained silent and tossed a grenade where she had asked.

Six well-hidden chain guns shot it down before it hit the ground. The ceiling shuddered and shook as the blast of the shattered flash bang

bounced off of it. Cortana knew that he would not have survived the barrage of bullets, even with his improved shielding system.

Another attempt from Ackerson's plan to make them stumble, Cortana thought with a wave of annoyance.

"Suggestions?"

"Glad you asked. What ammunition do you have?"

"Three extra magazines and two grenades."

She pressed her lips together. Even if he used all of his ammo and the two remaining grenades, he would be lucky if he destroyed two of the six guns that were in front of him. No, they would have to use the fact that he was underground to his advantage.

"You should be able to disable two of the chain guns if you cause a partial ceiling collapse. The debris then should give you enough cover to evade the remaining guns," she said.

Based on his long silence, she knew he did not like her plan.

"Other options?"

She sighed. "If there were any, I would have suggested it, Chief." She marked two positions on his HUD. "You will need to be exact or this won't work."

"Right."

She watched the Chief toss the grenades, holding her breath. The ceiling cracked and crumbled. He ducked down around the falling debris as best he could, but the chain guns were still targeting him.

"Hurry, Chief!"

His shields were depleted completely as he was approaching the end of the corridor. The Chief managed to tuck himself behind a large piece of the fallen ceiling before the last chief gun could hit him. He waited there until his shields fully recharged before he continued through the course.

The exit out of the underground path was blocked by a fallen beam. Cortana frowned. "You should be able to crawl out of there," she said, after she calculated the dimensions. "You'll have to lift the beam a half meter to the right, but no more than that or else the structural integrity might become unstable."

"Might?"

Cortana raised her eyebrow. So, it seemed like the overly-stolid Chief did have a dry wit about him.

She waited as he moved the beam out of the way. He slid on his belly, getting caught on the debris several times before clearing the room. Slowly, he stood up and continued down the path. It led to a dead end. Three meters above him, a hole to the outside loomed.

Before she could come up with an action plan, the Chief had walked

several yards backwards. Just as she was about to ask what he was going to do, he ran straight ahead and kicked off the stone wall in front of him. She held her breath as he twisted in midair and grabbed with one hand the edge of the hole. He grunted as the weight of him in his armor pulled against his arm. He swung his left arm over and secured his hold. Seconds later, he pulled himself out of the hole.

"Do I want to know when you learned how to do that move?" she asked, amused.

He didn't acknowledge her question as he sprinted towards the mouth of the cave. It was the last portion of the test. Cortana could almost feel their victory.

Her triumphant feeling was premature; the energy scan readings coming from the Chief's armor made her question whether or not he would survive the next five minutes.

"What is it?"

She frowned. How had John known something was wrong? She pushed aside her inquiry and focused on the much more pressing issue. "This can't be right," she muttered. Yet, as she reanalyzed the data, she couldn't deny the facts.

"Cortana?"

She frowned. "According to my readings, there are four plasma cannons in there."

"Plasma cannons?"

She understood his disbelief. Plasma artillery was the most recent, and most powerful, addition to the UNSC's weaponry. Apparently, Ackerson was doing everything he could to make sure they were going to fail the test.

Cortana ran through the calculations; things weren't looking promising for him. He would never make it across before the canons fired, unlessâ€¦|

She crossed her arms though he couldn't see her. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes."

The conviction behind his one word answer surprised Cortana.

"I want you to run across the room as fast as you can. When I give you the signal, I want you to drop to your knees and duck," Cortana said as her subroutines were busy pulling the files for the side project she had been developing for the MJOLNIR armor.

_"You want me to stop in the middle of the room?"_The doubt was clear in his voice.

"Yes," she said as she uploaded the protocol to his armor. "But it is imperative that you don't get hit with any plasma shots before I give you the signal."

She watched as he glanced in the mouth of the cave. _"Right," _he said dryly.

"Go," she instructed before she could second-guess her decision. If her upgrade didn't work, then John would be dead within seconds. She watched as he raced across the room, her subroutine automatically adjusting for John's increased speed.

"Now!" she said to him.

Instantly, he dropped as she had told him. His armor locked up immediately and the plasma blasts bounced off the shielding. The impact of the blasts knocked the Chief to the ground. She quickly accessed his vitals.

He was alive.

"Chief!" she called when he didn't move. "Chief! Hurry! Before they have a chance to recharge."

Slowly, he stood up. She knew based on his vitals he was teetering on the edge of unconsciousness, but he pushed himself forward. He sprinted to the bell at the end of the room and rang it three times.

Cortana let out a breath that she didn't realize she had been holding.

It was over.

They had won.

And, more importantly, Ackerson had lost.

"The test is over. Ackerson, shut those cannons down." Halsey's voice came over the comm channel. "_I need to med team in there now. And Cortana?"_

"Yes?" She didn't think her modification to the Chief's armor would go unnoticed.

"We've got some talking to do."

4. Stomping Grounds: Part 4

****Updated (3/12): Author Notes: No major edits for this section.**

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><p>John was going into shock.<p>

His vision narrowed. The world around him was fading.

Though Cortana had undoubtedly saved his life with her modification in his shield, the impact of the blast was almost more than his body could handle. Blood covered the inside of his visor, his shoulder

throbbed where it had been pulled out of its socket, and he was pretty sure he felt his tendon tear when he made his final dash to the bell.

"Chief? Can you hear me?" He faintly registered Cortana's rushed footsteps approaching him.

"Med team?" he forced out.

"They are on their way," Cortana said as she moved towards him. "Three minutes."

He could last that long. He had to. Losing consciousness would mean that Ackerson to take down the Spartan down had worked.

John tried to focus on Cortana, but his vision was still blurry. He was able to see enough to tell that she was no longer wearing her jacket. Why would she have taken it off?

"Just lay down," Cortana instructed, pushing on his shoulder.

His shields glowed in response.

"You can turn them off now. The test is over," Cortana noted wryly.

He turned off the shields and looked at Cortana who was saying something to him, but his brain was unwilling to cooperate with him. He forced himself to concentrate on the woman in front of him.

"You need to stay with me, John."

_That _caught his attention. No one, outside of Halsey and the Spartans, ever used his first name.

"Here," she said as she reached around and released the lock on his helmet. "Let's get this off you. That contusion on the back of your head doesn't need any more pressure on it."

He lifted up his head and allowed her to take off his helmet. When his face was revealed, she gasped softly.

"Ackerson," she hissed.

John was surprised at her anger. After years of dealing with his fellow Spartans, he was unaccustomed to how...civilian Cortana acted.

"I'll be fine." He wasn't accustomed to giving reassurance, but he didn't need to worry about Cortana's ire.

She stared at him for a second before nodding slightly. "You have survived worse. Most of the blood is from your broken nose," she assessed. "Doctor Halsey and her team should be able to mend your wounds fairly quickly."

The medical team led by Halsey approached them. Quickly, he was loaded onto the gurney and led away from the obstacle course. As they made their way to the Medical Bays, John overheard the two women talking.

"Any armor modification should have been run past me," Halsey said, annoyed.

"So Ackerson could have prepared for that too? I don't think so."

Halsey sighed at Cortana's stubbornness. "You did a good job stopping the bleeding," she said changing the subjects.

"I did a good job avoiding the bullet," Cortana countered emphatically. "We're lucky the bullet went through or else I'd be on a gurney too."

Cortana had been shot?

John lifted up slightly and saw the blood soaked fabric on her left arm. "You should have told me."

She, however, seemed unconvinced. "I'm not the one with a bruised kidney, a ruptured spleen, a torn Achilles tendon, a severe concussion and about a half-dozen other injuries," Cortana argued heatedly before turning back to Halsey. "I can't believe that you would authorize-"

"I didn't," the doctor interrupted. "High Command gave Ackerson full control of the test."

John felt a slight wave of relief. He knew the doctor always demanded the best from her Spartans, but the test seemed extreme, even to him.

"Regardless of who was in charge of the test," Halsey said, reigning in that part of the conversation, "the brass was certainly impressed with your shot. Most soldiers in the fleet couldn't have hit the sniper from where you were positioned."

John watched Cortana raise an eyebrow. "Did they miss the part in my assessment where it showed that my shot accuracy rivals the Spartans?"

"Reading and seeing are two different things," the doctor pointedly reminded her.

They entered into the medical bay where the techs started taking off the numerous pieces of John's armor. Cortana, thankfully, had her back to him as she continued talking to Halsey as he was clothed with paper scrubs.

The doctor approached him and looked at him with an indescribable look on her face. "The two of you did well." She looked up at the AI. "Better than I could have hoped. I'll be back when the room is ready for you."

As Halsey walked out of the room, Cortana turned to the Spartan. "How are you feeling, Chief?"

"Like I got shot with a plasma cannon."

She raised her eyebrows. "Please don't tell me you've been holding

out your sense of humor just for me."

"How did you get shot?" he asked, ignoring her dig.

She pressed her lips together. "Ackerson had a sniper try to take me out of the game," she answered angrily. "But don't worry, Chief, I've already arranged a little payback." She smiled grimly.

He half-sat up in surprise. Ackerson had tried to kill Cortana?

She seemed amused at his reaction. She gently pressed her hand against his shoulder until he was laying down again. He refused to acknowledge the heat coming from her skin or the fact she didn't seem at all flustered by her invasion of his personal space "Calm down, Chief. I already told you, I'm fine."

He nodded, changing subjects. "And my injuries?" He hoped she would move her hand soon; it was becoming an unwanted distraction.

Fortunately, the shift in the conversation did cause her to straighten and move her hand away. "You were right, you'll be back to normal in no time."

"And the armor?"

She frowned. "The shields took a beating out there. It's probably going to take several weeks, at least," she answered. "And that's if Halsey and I work on them non-stop."

Though the missions that required the use of his MJOLNIR armor were rare, due to the energy demands that they had, John couldn't help but to feel annoyed at the unnecessary damage caused to them by the test.

With a curt nod, he lay back down. Several quiet minutes passed with Cortana watching his vital signs carefully. She looked up as she heard footsteps approaching.

"All right. John, we're ready for you," Halsey said, nodding to the techs who led him out of the room.

John half-expected for Cortana to join them in the operating room, but she remained in the prep room. "You will be fine when we're done," the doctor said, mirroring Cortana's assessment as she studied the data coming from the medical readout.

John remained still as Halsey and her techs tended to his injuries. He hissed slightly as the doctor set his shoulder back into position. She carefully pushed him into a laying position and began knitting his torn tendon.

When she finished the procedure, Halsey took a step back, looking at him. "What did you think of Cortana, John?" she asked.

The problem was he didn't know quite what to think of the AI. He was having adjusting to how she thought and acted. She was unlike any person he had ever worked with since he entered the UNSC.

Finally, he looked at the doctor. "She's...unconventional," he

finally answered.

That caused Halsey to raise her eyebrows briefly. "Is that going to be a problem?"

"No, ma'am," he quickly answered.

Before the doctor could reply, Cortana walked into the room. A bandage had been wrapped around her upper arm.

"How's your arm?" he asked.

"Shouldn't you be more concerned with your recovery?" she shot back.

He looked at her before repeating, "Your arm?"

She rolled her eyes before shooting an exasperated glance at Halsey. "None of the reports I read on him mentioned his obstinance," she complained lightly.

She gingerly crossed her arms and looked at John exasperatedly. "It will be fine. Just like I told you," she answered, showing him the bandaged arm. The AI took a step towards him and leaned down to his ear. "And there is nothing wrong with being unconventional," she whispered conspiratorially.

John wasn't surprised at the fact she had overheard the conversation between him and the doctor.

She straightened as she cracked a grin at Halsey who was watching their exchange with unabashed interest.

"I never said there was," he replied as he pulled himself into a sitting position.

She grinned briefly at Halsey's direction. "I keep liking him more and more."

John refused to acknowledge her offhanded comment.

"You need to report to Lord Hood. He wants your after-action report right away," Halsey said. "John will be up there when I have cleared him for duty."

For a moment, John thought the AI might argue, but Cortana just nodded. "I think I'll have a chat with him about allowing Ackerson having total control in our little test." With a wave in their direction, she walked out of the room.

"Unconventional?" Halsey asked with a touch of amusement in her voice.

He nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

"Well, all I have to say is that the two of you left quite an impression on High Command," Halsey said quietly. "The two of you make quite a formidable team."

"Thank you, ma'am." Whether he was grateful for the compliment or for

Cortana, he wasn't sure.

"You're welcome, John. Take care of each other and you'll be fine."

5. Let's Get This Show on the Road: Part 1

****Updated (3/12): Author Notes: No major edits for this section.****

* * *

><p>0645 Hours, March 4, 2552 (Military Calendar)
>North America, Reach UNSC Military Complex,
Omega Wing-Section
Three secure facility**

"So, High Command has finally given us a real mission, huh?"

Catherine looked up from her computer to where Cortana was standing with a raised eyebrow and a smug smile.

After she and Cortana had finished making repairs and upgrades to John's armor, High Command had sent Cortana and John on several mundane missions, carefully reviewing their abilities with their neural link.. Their success, and Ackerson's inability to come up with a valid reason why the project should be stopped, propelled Lord Hood to give them a chance to complete a high-risk operation.

Catherine pushed up her glasses, giving her a disapproving look. "I thought that information was classified."

Cortana shrugged. "Nuance." She lifted up John's helmet and looked at her reflection in the gold visor before setting it down on Catherine's desk. "John has already been outfitted with most of his armor and is on his way up here."

"Eager to get off base?"

"I'm eager to start to actually do something other than sit in a lab, yes." She paused as she realized the implications of her statement. "No offense to present company."

Catherine waved off her apology. She was perfectly content to help the fight against the Covenant without being on the frontline.

The entrance doors to her lab slid apart, revealing John. "Ma'am," he greeted when he saw Catherine.

"You never call me ma'am," Cortana noted from behind the desk.

He turned in the direction of the AI and frowned slightly. The motion was so brief and subtle that had Catherine not known him as well as she did, she would have thought she had imagined seeing things. Was there some kind of issue between the two of them that she didn't know about?

Cortana didn't miss his look of discontent either. She crossed her arms defensively. "It's fine."

The scar.

Catherine looked at Cortana who had taken off her "oppressive" ONI jacket and left the dark grey tank shirt exposed. The red, angry skin stood out in contrast to her pale skin. Catherine had offered for her to go under reconstructive surgery, but the AI immediately dismissed the idea.

"I always want to remember what Ackerson wanted to do to me." _

Neither of them had commented on the fact she couldn't forget anything, even if she wanted to do such a thing. She understood the AI's anger and hadn't pushed the point any further.

"Really," she said emphatically. She grabbed the jacket off the back of the desk chair and flashed Catherine an exasperated look. "Maybe you should tell him about our new orders so he will stop being such a mother hen."

Catherine noticed the stunned look on John's face. He had been called many things since his entrance into the Spartan program; she doubted mother hen had ever been one of them. She held out a tablet for him to take. "Your objective is to retrieve several officers who fell under attack in an outskirt of Los Angeles by Covenant forces twelve hours ago. We believe that the bridge crew of _The Pillar of Autumn_ has been taken hostage by the Elite forces. I don't need to tell the two of you that your actions throughout the mission will be under full review once it is completed." The doctor studied the two of them.

"We'll be successful, ma'am," John assured her.

A whisper of a smile passed over Catherine's lips. "I would expect nothing less, John. The two of you are to report to the pod station immediately. Your Scorpion transport is waiting for you there."

Cortana froze briefly. "Pod station? I thought we were going to have a Pelican transport."

The doctor pressed her lips together. There were some thing that even Cortana didn't know, she mused. "Yes, well, there was a last minute change. It would seem that Colonel Ackerson has learned of your...aversion to enclosed places."

She did her best to keep her annoyance out of the conversation. It was another attempt by James to thwart the success of her two best achievements.

"Of course he did," sneered Cortana. Catherine watched as she attempted to push away her discomfort and shrugged. "I guess it's better than having another sniper waiting for us when we leave."

A heavy tension settled over the room. It was Halsey who finally broke the silence. She reached to the back of her table and held out John's helmet for him to take. "Here you go, John."

He looked appreciatively at the helmet and placed it on his head.

"I think if it was up to the Chief, he'd always be wearing that armor," Cortana mused.

It was true. All of her Spartans felt the same way. But with the enormous energy consumption the armor took, they were only able to wear the armor during active high profile missions.

The doctor picked up her tablet and walked to the door. This was their first major mission since the test and she wanted to see the two of them off. Cortana took the lead with John following behind her.

Catherine watched as the future of the UNSC walked in front of her. She trailed Cortana and John at a distance, allowing herself to watch the two of them interact. John walked with sturdy steps, his posture perfect, his gaze facing forward. Cortana kept up with the Spartan, leaning in his personal space, casting glances in his direction as she spoke to him.

Despite giving permission for Cortana to be assigned to work with John, the doctor had her concerns about their compatibility. For all of John's stolidness, Cortana was overt. She knew John would rather be with a group of his own Spartans rather than a high-spirited AI. But, they were the best the UNSC had. They, in time, would adjust to each other and they would finally be able to take a stand against the Covenant.

There was no other option.

The two of them proceeded to the security checkpoint. As the three of them were waved forward, Catherine moved close enough to hear their conversation.

Cortana looked up at John. "So, do you have a plan?"

"To complete the mission."

Cortana crossed her arms at his reply. "So I take that as a no. I guess it's a good thing I've already come up with several possibilities."

Before John could respond, they entered the hangar. Catherine knew the second Cortana spotted their transport. The AI did her best to hide her discomfort at the sight of the Scorpion, but the doctor knew John noticed her trepidation immediately.

The doctor wanted to offer some kind of encouragement, but that wasn't her place. Cortana was more than capable; she would have to do some adjusting of her own if this partnership was going to be successful.

"Cortana?" John's one word was weighed with concern.

She shook her head and faced him, painting a smile on her face. "I'll be fine."

Catherine frowned as she remained back at the back of the hangar. Cortana didn't look like she would be fine. Even from this distance, the doctor could tell her voice was laced with tension.

"Still think she's the answer to the UNSC's prayers?"

Ackerson.

Halsey pulled her eyes from Cortana and John and faced the colonel. "I have faith in Cortana and the Master Chief."

He leaned down to her ear. "Only you could have created an AI that was claustrophobic, Catherine."

She bristled as she pulled back. "She'll be fine, James. You'll see."

"Are you sure they are up for such an intense mission?" He tapped his finger on his chin. "I can't help but to wonder if you missed anything else that wasn't revealed during the compatibility test. If I were you, I'd be worried that your pet projects probably won't survive this intense of a mission with all the flaws in your research."

Catherine tapped down the urge to rise to her defense. She and Cortana had already integrated a buffer in John's neural lace than would lessen the amount of data assimilated by his armor. Any issues with their neural link should be negligible. "I would hold off on your concerns until their mission is complete, James. One glitch does not debunk the years of research I have done with ONI."

He grinned widely. The gesture was not sincere. "Oh, I'm willing to give you the benefit of the doubt. If they really are the best, as you claim, they should be able to handle anything that comes their way. That's why I requested that an additional objective be added to their mission." He paused dramatically. "That isn't going to be a problem, is it?"

She glowered as she turned away from him to grab her tablet. She tapped in several commands and saw the updated file. "You want them to salvage the Autumn? The last report we got from the ship showed that the navigation system is shot and the defense screen is shoddy at best."

"If you don't think the two of them are up for it, I could always contact Lord Hood--"

"That won't be necessary, James. They will finish all of their objectives." She raised her gaze to John and Cortana who were in the process of getting into the Scorpion. "You and the rest of High Command will see that they had not to be underestimated."

6. Let's Get This Show on the Road: Part 2

****Updated (3/12): Author Notes: No major edits for this section.****

* * *

><p>"I should have known he was going to show up." There was no mistaking the acerbity in Cortana's voice.<p>

John pressed his lips together. It was true that Ackerson, at best,

had been contentious to him and his fellow Spartans, but there was still the chain of command to respect.

She put her hand on her hip and frowned. Her eyes got a far off look briefly before facing John. "Our objectives have just been updated. We have to retrieve the _Autumn _as well as per Colonel Ackerson's request."

She raised her eyebrows. _What do you think about him now? _she silently asked.

Last minute updates to missions were not strange for John; in the battlefield, objectives were always being modified and adjusted. "We will bring the _Autumn_ back as we have been ordered to do." There was no room other option.

With a sigh, she faced the Scorpion transport that was waiting for them. "You make it sounds as if it is so simple."

John assessed the ship in front of them. For a Subterranean Transport Pod Ship, it was perfectly acceptable. The ship, made for a two-man crew, didn't have much in terms of space: there was a small cabin and an even smaller cargo storage area used to hold weapons and basic provisions.

While the Covenant controlled the skies above with their superior air power, the UNSC dominated the underground. Thousands of subterranean tunnels criss-crossed each other under the surface of all land areas governed by the UNSC, including the Americas and part of eastern Africa. Ships like the _Autumn _and Pelicans were rare in their ability to both fly and navigate the underground tunnel system.

Travelling underground in tight quarters was a normal part of a soldier's life.

But, John hadn't missed her unenthusiastic reaction when she saw it the first time. It unnerved him that Cortana seemed so bothered by the idea of using a Scorpion transport. How was it possible for an AI to be claustrophobic?

John was tempted to ignore her obvious discomfort, but he needed to make sure that her fear wasn't going to jeopardize the mission; they would be in the Scorpion for a while together. "Cortana?"

She turned to him and shook her head. "Don't worry about me, Chief. I'll be fine." She cast a quick glance in Halsey's direction before drawing up her shoulders and walked towards the Scorpion.

The soldier saluted the two of them as they approached the vehicle. "Good luck, sir, ma'am."

"Thank you, Commander," Cortana said as she climbed aboard.

John followed behind her and took his seat. With his armor, it was going to be an even tighter fit for the two of them in the cabin. As he settled into the too-small chair, he looked at Cortana, looking for any signs of alarm, but she seemed to be handling the situation well.

He watched as she opened a comm channel to the tower. "This is CTN 0452-9 requesting permission to disembark."

"Permission granted."

She fingered a couple of commands and the Scorpion rolled forward to the entrance of the tunnel system. "Setting course for the Los Angeles. We should be there in a little under four hours," Cortana said as the Scorpion started its subterranean trek.

She turned towards him slightly, bumping into his arm. "Cozy enough for you?"

"It will be fine."

"So," she said, leaning back in her chair and closing her eyes briefly, "I'm sure you are wondering about my irrational fear of tight spaces."

Though he had spent time with Cortana over the past two months when they had been assigned various missions after the repairs on his armor had been completed, he still was taken aback by how well she seemed to know the way he thought.

He nodded slightly. "It had crossed my mind...yes."

"You can thank Doctor Halsey for my claustrophobia," she answered. She cocked a half-smile at him.

He looked at her, confused. "She programmed you that way?"

She let out a soft laugh. "Not exactly. My core processing is from one of Doctor Halsey's cloned brains. Her thoughts, her fears, her aspirations were transferred to my matrix chip when I was first created in her lab."

"Is that why you look like her too?"

She shook her head. "No. That was completely my decision. When I was first activated and still limited in my holographic avatar, I was given the choice of what I wanted my body to look like. Since Doctor Halsey is the closest thing to a mother I have, I decided to mimic the doctor's genetic makeup. There are still genetic differences between the two of us because perfect cloning is still several years away, but the family resemblance is sort of hard to miss."

Yes, it is, he wordlessly mused.

"But you don't have to worry about me freaking out during this trip," she assured him. "I also inherited something else from Doctor Halsey."

"What's that?" he prompted when she didn't continue."

She raised her right eyebrow and smirked.
"Stubbornness."

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As Cortana had predicted, they made it to the California coast

without any major issues. Cortana piloted the Scorpion two kilometers to the east of where Keyes' last signal had come from. The craft was carefully tucked behind the rubble of a destroyed building, hiding in the late afternoon shadows.

"The casualties here were devastating," she commented as she stepped out of the cabin. She looked to the west. "But so far, we're still holding our ground in Los Angeles. Blue Team is responsible for most of its success."

John nodded. Before his abrupt transfer to Reach, he was there fighting alongside his Spartan counterparts. Though the battle was tough, he knew that Fred would lead the team to success.

She opened the storage compartment on the side and pulled out an ankle holster. Quickly, she strapped it on and grabbed the pistol from its holder inside the ship. John reached in and grabbed his assault rifle with a couple of extra mags. He reached around and attached the firearm to the back of his armor before grabbing his pistol.

"We're going to have to take this nice and slow. You know how the Covenant work."

Of course he did. When they did manage to secure a town, they stationed snipers to pick off any person who attempted to infiltrate their area. Their high powered rifles had claimed the lives of too many UNSC officers over the past two decades. "There is a sewer line that runs under the majority of the city. We should be able to use that to get by the border unit."

John frowned slightly. Sewer lines had their own dangers as well. "What about the proximity mines?"

"Like I said, Chief, nice and slow."

Stealthily, they ducked between the destroyed buildings and abandoned shopping centers until they reached the position. Cortana stopped in front of the entrance and held her hand out. "Spartans first," she said dryly.

He walked inside and activated his helmet lights as the sunlight faded. Cortana walked beside him, carrying a flashlight of her own. She had already uploaded the underground layout to his HUD already, now they just needed to stay alert for any proximity mines the Covenant possibly hid.

As they approached the first major intersection, John paused. He carefully scanned the area, looking for any anomalous energy readings. When there was none detected, he crossed through the open area.

Several minutes passed without any incident, but as he was about to make a right turn, Cortana held out a hand. "Did you see that?"

John shook his head slightly. "No." Suddenly, John felt a pressure building in the back of his head.

She got a far off look for several seconds. "Take a look at this."

The video feed from two minutes before started playing through his HUD. A section of the video had been highlighted and filtered through his inferred sights. Three small figures appeared momentarily before disappearing before a large column.

"They're too small to be Covenant," he said as the video feed faded away.

"They could be survivors from the initial attack," offered Cortana.

John frowned. That would be a snag in their mission. But, there was a long standing order that UNSC officers would to rescue any and all civilians from the Covenant. If there were survivors from the attack, it would be their responsibility to bring them back as well.

Left with no other option, John started cautiously walking forward. As they approached the position where they detected the life signs a young man, no older than twelve years old, jumped out and pointed a plasma rifle directly at Cortana.

"Don't move," he said.

John instantly stopped. If the boy accidentally shot Cortana, there would be no way she would be able to survive the blast. "We're here to help," Cortana said evenly.

"You UNSC?" A little girl asked from the shadows.

"Yes." Cortana's voice sounded more annoyed than frightened, John noticed.

"They're here for the ship they shot down," the boy proclaimed to the shadows.

Now that John was closer, he could detect at least twenty separate life signs in the shadows.

The boy turned to John. "What's your name and rank?"

Briefly, John considered not answering the child's question. But time was not on their side and they needed to get to the _Autumn_'s position as quickly as they could. "I'm Sierra-117. "

The boy's hold on the rifle faltered slightly. "You're a Spartan."

John raised his eyebrows. Very few people in the UNSC knew about the elite soldier force, let alone a child in the middle of southwest America. "Yes, I am."

"Since you seem to know about the Chief, why don't you give us your name?" Cortana asked. "And stop pointing that gun at me, for that matter."

He lowered the weapon and looked at Cortana. "Billy. Billy Cole."

Cortana looked at him suspiciously. "As in?"

"Preston Cole was my grandfather," he answered knowingly. "We were in the city when we saw the Covenant coming. My father told me to gather the children and remain underground until he came for us. That was seven days ago." He looked at Cortana. "He's dead, isn't he?"

"I don't know," she replied. "He's been listed MIA since his transponder signal was lost four days ago."

Billy jutted his chin forward. He was strong, John noticed. The boy reminded of himself when he was a child in the Spartan program. "I understand."

"We can't leave them here. Protocol 431.0 is clearly in effect here," Cortana said via their private COM channel.

He suppressed a sigh. "No, we can't."

Their options were limited. They could backtrack and escort the children back to where the Scorpion was waiting. One of them could stay behind with them and wait for the other to return with the _Autumn_. Neither option was preferable.

"We're fine here," Billy said, picking up on the fact they were talking about them.

"You might be safe from the Covenant for now, but they have been known to patrol the sewers and underground tunnels," Cortana replied.

The boy swallowed thickly. "I know. A patrol came through the area three days ago. Weâ€"Iâ€" He paused, taking a deep breath. "I killed them. That's how I got the gun."

"More Covenant haven't come?"

He shook his head, still shaken by his confession. "No, I think the ship that crashed near City Hall distracted them."

"Where are the bodies?"

"I didn't want the others to see them. Especially the little ones. So I pulled them into a dead-end," Billy replied. "I took everything off of them that I thought we could use."

"Show us," John instructed.

The young boy looked at John for a second before nodding. He led them past the nearly two dozen children that were watching the exchange eagerly.

"Are they going to get us out of here?"

"Do they know what happened to my mommy?"

"Why is he a robot?"

"Do they have food?"

Billy held up his hand and all the questions ceased. "Everything will

be fine," he assured his peers as he walked to a small pile of picked items. "This is what I found."

Cortana knelt down and picked up a small sphere. "A communication transponder. This could come in handy."

Their conversation was cut short by a young girl walking to them. "Are you guys going to get us out of here?"

"I say we send them to the Scorpion. Billy seems more than capable of leading these kids there," Cortana suggested via their private comm. She turned to the boy. "How was your father going to contact you?"

Billy hesitated. "He gave me this." He dug in his pocket and pulled out a UNSC communicator device. "I know he wasn't supposed to. He, uh, found it on Private Masterson after he died, ma'am. He said the private would want me to have it, so that we wouldn't share the same fate."

Cortana looked directly at the boy. "He's right, you know. I'm going to upload the coordinates to the Scorpion's position. Take the other children and wait there until the Chief or I give you the signal."

The boy's eyebrows furrowed. "How are you going to upload anything? We don't have a computer."

John watched a flutter of a smile pass over Cortana's lips. "I'm a computer specialist. It will be no problem for me to get those to you." She looked at the group of children. "Is anyone hurt?"

Billy shook his head. "No. But we are hungry."

"And thirsty."

"There are some provisions in the main storage hub on the Scorpion," Cortana replied. "There were no Covenant patrols in the area when we landed, but you need to be careful."

"We will, ma'am." He turned to John and saluted. Slowly, the Spartan returned the gesture. "Good luck." He turned back to the group of children. "Let's go."

John and Cortana watched as the nearly two dozen young children followed Billy into the darkened shadows of the tunnel.

"That was unexpected," Cortana said dryly after the group had turned a corner.

John nodded as they started walking again. He couldn't help but to wonder what other unexpected surprises this mission had waiting for them.

7. Let's Get This Show on the Road: Part 3

****Updated (3/12): Author Notes: No major edits for this section.****

****Original author notes:**** ****Somehow I inadvertently missed posting half of chapter 7, so you should probably go and reread that or you'll miss a bit of background for this chapter. This chapter has a bit more violence than the others, just so you know.****

****And a big thanks to all of you who are following along. :D****

* * *

><p>The rest of the journey through the tunnel was uneventful. Though it seemed strange to Cortana that there hadn't been a search party for the fallen Covenant, she wasn't going to argue with the results. Maybe Catherine was right; maybe John did have a certain amount of luck about him.<p>

When they emerged from the underground sewer, Cortana squinted in the fading sunlight. The two of them hid behind another building that was reduced to rubble as they surveyed the buildings in front of them. She uploaded the building schematics to the Chief's HUD and activated a location marker on the sixth floor of the enormous building.

"This is Keyes's last known location. If we're as lucky as I think you are, then the rest of his crew is with him. If not," she said, activating another marker on the display, "I'll be here. By the time you reach the signal's position, I should be in the system and I'll be able to locate the others."

"Understood."

On the way to the city's center, they had quickly agreed the best way to succeed in their mission was to separate and each complete their own the objectives: John would proceed to the last known coordinates of Keyes while Cortana would attempt to infiltrate the temporary command center the Covenant had set up so she could release the Autumn.

But, first they had to get into the eight-story building.

Cortana craned her neck and shielded her eyes from the building's reflective windows' harsh glare. "I hope you've stayed in shape, Chief. Climbing seven flights of stairs is going to be difficult, even for a Spartan," she said dryly.

He didn't respond to her comment, as expected.

She activated another location marker on his HUD. "There's the Autumn." She frowned. It was guarded more heavily than she anticipated. That would slow them down a bit.

John looked in the Autumn's direction. "Will you be able to repair it?" he asked, seemingly unfazed by the number of Elite soldiers standing watch.

"You mean will we be able to complete our mission?" she asked, amused. She got a distant look for a second. "Yes, based on the information I'm getting from the onboard computer, we should be ok. The shipboard AI and navigation systems were completely destroyed...I guess it's a good thing I can fill in that void. But, despite the beating it took during the crash landing, the engines are operational."

"We'll rendezvous there," John said.

"Will do, Chief," she agreed. "We need to get into the back of the building. I'm only detecting three life signs back there. It seems as though they are more concerned with the ship than they are the building."

Together, they ducked behind abandoned cars and stealthily made their way to the back of the building without being detected. She knelt down and pulled out the Covenant communication device. "Now it's time to put this to good use."

She quickly hacked into the Covenant communication grid and sent several false signals to the Grunts that were guarding the back of the building. Seconds later, the three soldiers walked away from their post.

"We won't have much time before they realize something is wrong," Cortana said as they sprinted across the open parking lot. When they entered the building, they went through the maintenance access door.

A pile of corpses greeted them as they walked through the hallway.

Cortana swore under her breath.

They were mostly UNSC soldiers, including Thomas Cole. The Chief wordlessly collected their dog tags while Cortana changed their statuses from MIA to KIA in the UNSC database.

She said nothing to the Chief as they continued making their way to the fire stairwell. Cortana did her best to ignore the blood-spattered walls and pushed forward. Seeing the Covenant's handiwork firsthand was significantly different than accessing data files from the safety in Reach.

Death was in the air.

Danger surrounded them.

They climbed the first three flights of stairs together. "The command center is on this level. I'll hack into the security grid and get you access into the east wing." She frowned briefly. "I'm not going to be able to get an accurate head count on the Covenant until I'm in the mainframe. But, based on what we've seen, I'd say this building is swarming with Covenant."

"Understood."

"Good luck," she said as he started climbing the stairs again.

Now that the Chief had left, Cortana cautiously opened the door. The lights had been cut off; only the faint emergency lights were glowing. Her enhanced vision allowed Cortana to make out the shapes of two Jackals. They had their backs to her, watching for any movement in the intersection they were standing in.

She slipped her combat knife out of its sheath. Her timing would have

to be perfect, her speed like a Spartan, to take down the mid-level soldiers. She slowly slid from behind the door and slithered in the shadows.

Nearly three minutes passed before one of the Jackals started to move away from the other, approaching her position. Cortana knew he didn't see her; his steps were still slow and deliberate. She glanced at the other Jackal that was still turned away from her before turning back to her target.

She held the knife in position, ready to attack. When the Jackal unknowingly walked by her, she struck and stabbed the unsuspecting soldier. Before his body had fallen to the floor, she advanced on the other Covenant soldier.

Her work was quick and effective. Less than five seconds later, the unfortunately Jackal slumped to the floor. Cortana ignored the gore and carnage and put her knife away. She made her way to the T-junction at the end of the hall. The sound of voices caused her to freeze.

She carefully peered around the corner and saw three Covenant soldiers: two Grunts and an Elite. She considered her options. While the Elite was undoubtedly more skilled than the Grunts, Cortana knew the kamikaze tendencies of the bumbling soldiers were more of an immediate threat.

She pulled out her pistol. With deliberate aim, she shot the two Grunts in quick succession.

The Elite roared as he watched the Grunts fall.

Cortana double-backed to her previous position. It would be nearly impossible for her to see the Elite due to his cloaking armor. Cortana would have to rely on her other senses to take down the Elite.

"Come out, vermin," he demanded.

As if it was a possibility that she would listen to his demand.

"You will not leave this building alive," he promised.

She could feel the vibrations of his heavy footsteps. Quickly, she calculated where she needed to aim her pistol. Without hesitation, she whipped around and fired.

Bang.

The cloaking device was nonfunctional.

Bang.

The Elite's shielding failed.

Bang.

The Elite fell to the ground, never knowing where his attacker had come from.

She collected his plasma rifle and looked around for any other Covenant that heard the attack. When she was confident that no one else was coming, she accessed how the Chief was progressing: he was approaching the floor of the captain's last known location.

She proceeded down the narrow hallway, collecting the plasma grenades from the dead Grunts. Finally, she approached the security door to the building's control panel that the Covenant were using as their command center. She quickly hacked into the system and overrode the codes.

The locks released. Cortana reached for the handle and pushed the door open.

The lights were on in the room, allowing her to see the five-person security team who had been executed at the hands of the Covenant. She pushed aside her feelings of revulsion and focused on the task at hand.

"All right, Chief," she said, ignoring the blood spatter on her own clothing, "I'm in."

8. Let's Get This Show on the Road: Part 4

****Updated (3/12): Author Notes: This section is quite different from the original section I posted.**

* * *

><p>Cortana had been right in her warning. The building was swarming with Covenant.<p>

John ducked behind a corner and dodged the laser beam coming his way. Though he had been able to fight through the groups of Grunts and Elites, John found himself somewhat unprepared for two pairs of Hunters, the Covenant's heavily armored fighters, to be waiting for him outside of Keyes' position. The first three had been dealt with quickly, thanks to the rapid fire of his assault rifle, but the last Hunter stubbornly clung to life.

John fired a volley of shots. The Hunter staggered under the gunfire, but didn't fall. John's gun clicked as he reached the end of his clip.

He was out of ammo.

John reached down and grabbed the handle of the combat knife that was attached to his armor. It wasn't his preferred way of killing a Hunter, but without any more bullets, it was his only option.

"_All right, Chief_," Cortana's voice came through their private COM channel. "_I'm in._"

"Understood." His eyes never left the bulking soldier. Or his Fuel Rod Gun which he had fired in his direction.

John waited until the attack stopped and the Hunter had to wait for the powerful weapon to recharge. Without hesitation, he hurled the

knife at the Hunter. It embedded into his neck, causing him to howl in pain.

Even a hunter couldn't survive that wound, John knew. He stepped out from his position and watched the soldier twist in pain. Finally, with a grunt and a thud, the last of the Hunters fell.

John picked up the Hunter's gun from the ground and ignored the corpses sprawled on the ground as he approached the security door. He tried opening it.

Nothing happened.

He hated being exposed and in the open. "Cortana?"

Several seconds passed before she responded. "Give me a second, Chief."

Two seconds later, he heard the locks release.

"_I'm detecting five life signs, but that's all the sensors are giving me. It's pretty low tech, no cameras, which is odd when you think about it,_" Cortana said as he entered the narrow passage. "_You're going to have to move fast. I've been able to implement a jamming signal so they can't tell what we're doing, but they already know we're here. While you're getting the captain and the others, I'm going to work on releasing the _Autumn_. They've got a lock down code on it right now._"

"Will you be able to get it ready?"

"_Don't worry about me, Chief. But..._"

"But?"

"_There is no way I'm going to be able to repair the cloaking shield. So, expect a bumpy ride out of here_, " she warned.

"Understood." He closed the comm channel and turned the corner. Slowly, he carefully proceeded down the corridor. As he approached the door, the locks were released.

John opened the door.

The room was pitch black. He turned on his helmet's lights and looked at the soldiers who were squinting in the brightness. There were several bodies on the ground; John knew from the positioning they hadn't survived. He looked at the rest of the crew; some were bloodied, others looked like they wouldn't be able to walk out of the building on their own.

It was another snag in the mission.

"Where is Captain Keyes?"

Avery Johnson stood up. His lip had been split; his left eye was nearly swollen shut. He paused for a second as he assessed the Spartan standing in front of him. "The bastards took him about a half an hour ago. We tried to stop them, but..." His voice trailed off as he gazed moved to the back of the room. "...Private Jenkins didn't

know when to stop fighting."

John followed Johnson to the back of the room. A woman he recognized as Melissa McKay was kneeling beside the private. Dried blood was caked on her face; her left arm had been hastily bandaged. She rocked back on her heels as she took in the sight of John. "Sir," she greeted.

"Is he conscious?" he asked, looking at the young man. Jenkins had suffered the worst at the hands of his captives. His right eye was swollen shut; his right foot was contorted in an unnatural angle, blood was dripping down his face. His eyes were dilated. Sweat was dripping down his face.

"Barely."

"Cortana?" He knew she would know what he was asking.

"_I'm pretty sure I found Keyes' location. He's on my floor. You get the others to the _Autumn_. I'll take care of the captain_."

John looked at McKay. "What's the status of the rest of the crew?"

"Eight of us, including the captain, are left. The others," she gestured to the fallen bodies, "weren't so lucky."

John nodded. He knew the private would be unable to walk due to his injuries. McKay moved out of his way as he knelt down to pick Jenkins up. He hoisted him over his shoulder. "Let's go."

The crew followed him out of their cell. McKay and Johnson picked up the fallen Hunters' weapons. "This is what I'm talkin' about," Johnson said as he reloaded the gun.

"_Chief, you've got several dozen Covenant headed to your location._"

Several dozen Covenant versus seven UNSC officers that were able to fight. The odds were decidedly not in their favor.

"Options?"

"_I'd thought you'd never ask. Go to the elevator I just marked on your HUD. Push the up button, but do not get in the car. The Covenant set up a little trap for us, but we're not going to fall for it. There is another fire escape in the far northwest quadrant of the building, go there and you should be able to make your way to the _Autumn_."

John made his way to the elevator and pushed the button as Cortana instructed. The light on the panel lit; he spun around and quickly ran to the other set of stairs that Cortana had marked on his HUD. He glanced over his shoulder to the rest of the _Autumn_ crew. They were moving slower than he was, but, despite their injuries, they were keeping up with the Spartan.

They descended down the stairs with minimal contact from the Covenant. Whatever Cortana was doing to keep the Covenant distracted was working. When they approached the ground level, John led them out

of the building.

"_Wait there. There are still too many Covenant around._"

John looked for any signs of Cortana, but didn't see her anywhere.

He looked at the _Autumn_ which was still being protected by a half dozen Elites and over a dozen Grunts. Cortana was right. They wouldn't be able to board the ship being so outnumbered and outgunned.

0--0--0--0--0--0--0--0--0--

So much for the Chief's supposed luck, Cortana thought as she stepped away from the computer. She was already annoyed at the antiquated machinery in the compound; there was no live video feed for any of the buildings; the motion sensors were limited at best. And, most frustrating of all, there was no new data in this mainframe for her to assimilate.

As she made her way down the corridor, she saw her destination. She hoped she had been correct when she told the Chief she knew where Keyes was located. Based on the congregation of life signs, she calculated she had a eight-three percent chance that her theory was correct.

She knew even with a best case scenario-that the other three life signs were the bumbling grunts, it still would be tricky to take them all down before shots were fired. She crouched outside the door of the room where the life signs were. Even though the door was solid, Cortana was able to make out the muffled voices on the other side.

"Tell us, what was your ship doing in this sector?"

"I've already told you. My ship's nav systems were down. We didn't know we were entering into Covenant controlled territory." Cortana ran a voice analysis. It was Jacob Keyes.

"And I have told you that your feigned ignorance will not be tolerated."

Cortana flinched at the sound of a punch being thrown. It was time to get the captain out of there. She ran the calculations. Based on where the voices were coming from, she could figure out their location in the room.

She could only determine the location of Keyes and the two Covenant that had spoken. The position of the other two hostiles were still unknown, but it would have to do. They were running out of time.

Surprisingly, the door had no security locks which allowed Cortana to solely focus on hitting the targets as the door slid apart. Before the door could completely open she had already fired her first shot, taking down the grunt that was guarding the entryway. By the time the door had completely opened, she aimed her pistol at the Elite and fired a single shot in his skull.

He was no longer a threat.

Captain Keyes looked at her, surprised. Despite not being able to access his vitals, Cortana knew he was severely injured. And yetâ€|

He actually smiled at Cortana before he rolled out of the way and reached for the plasma pistol that the fallen Elite had dropped.

Cortana turned swiftly to the left as she sensed movement from the shadows. The glowing ball of plasma that was starting to glow was enough for her to be able to fire a shot and kill the Jackal standing in the corner of the room.

Behind her, a shot rang out of a plasma pistol. She whipped around quickly to face Keyes, worried that he had been shot by the remaining Covenant soldier. But, to her relief, he held the recently discharged weapon. Together, they watched the Elite slump forward to the ground.

She watched as the Captain took in her appearance. "Well, I guess that means Catherine got her way," he commented wryly.

Cortana knew the history between her commanding officer and the woman who was her creator. The former lovers had an affair then lasted several years and ended with the announcement of Halsey's pregnancy. While Keyes agreed to keep the information private, coming up with some cover story that Miranda's mother had died during a Covenant attack, Cortana knew the truth. As the years passed, the two of them only talked in passing, a noble feat considering how small the UNSC had become. But, apparently, Keyes had been keeping tabs on Halsey's work and ambitions.

"You should know that she always gets what she wants."

"Yeah, I do," he said, almost wistfully.

Cortana held out a hand for him to grab. When he grasped it, she pulled him up slowly. "The Chief already has the rest of your crew near the Autumn," she said, as she put her arm around his shoulders to support his weight.

"A Spartan, eh? I guess the UNSC missed us," Keyes said, wincing slightly with each step they took.

Cortana didn't bother correcting him, that Ackerson and High Command were hoping that a seemingly difficult mission would highlight any issues with her and the Master Chief. With their stretched resources, they wouldn't have sent a Spartan to rescue a few soldiers and a forty-year old ship.

When they reached the ground level, she opened her comm channel. "Chief, I've got the captain. We're on our way," Cortana said.

"What's his status?"

"He'll be fine once we get back to Reach," Cortana replied.

A large thud shook the ground. Cortana identified the sound as a brute shot. "You do remember we have to fly the _Autumn_ out of here, right?"

"The ship is fine."

Cortana and Keyes made their way out the door. She knew they were going to have to go scanned the area and saw several grunts approaching their position.

The Grunt in the front of the pack suddenly started looking around frantically, patting his body. "Where did my gun go?" He reached for his holster. "Oh, here it is. Ha ha ha!"

Cortana and Keyes shot the untalented soldiers with ease. "When you think about it, we're probably doing the Covenant a favor by getting rid of them," Keyes said dryly.

"But," Cortana said as she released Keyes briefly to retrieve a couple of plasma grenades, "they can come in handy."

She saw the Chief with the others several hundred feet away. Unfortunately for her and the captain, there were still several dozen Covenant between them and the others who were guarding the _Autumn_. "Gotta escape plan?" She asked the Chief.

The Chief turned towards her. "I'd thought we'd try shooting our way out. Take them by surprise."

Cortana smirked. "A few well-placed stickies would help. You got any over there?"

"Yeah."

"OK, if we hit our targets here," she said, uploading the coordinates to his HUD. "That should take out enough of the Covenant to get us aboard the _Autumn_."

"Understood."

"Alright, on my mark." She waited until the enemy forces were distracted by the Chief. "Now!"

She threw the plasma grenade into the group of Covenant. She watched as four other stickies arced through the air, each getting remarkably close to their target. Seconds later, the grenades exploded. Bodies flew through the air. Chaos surrounded them as the Grunts ran around aimlessly.

"Come on, Captain," Cortana said as they made their way through the smoke and carnage.

He limped as she guided him forward. To her surprise, the Chief and the others were waiting for them instead of boarding the _Autumn_. "Here," she said, handing Keyes off to the Chief.

He picked him up effortlessly as she and the others slowly scanned the area, looking for any other Covenant. "We should really get moving," Cortana said urgently.

Together, they made their way to the Autumn. Cortana remotely opened the loading bay hatch and they climbed inside. She made her way up to the bridge quickly and synced with the computer system. As the interface was complete, she frowned.

"We've got company," she said as she started the take-off sequence.

"Three banshees incoming," Dominique said, frowning.

"Weapon status?" the Chief asked after he carefully set Keyes down in the captain's chair.

"None available," Cortana said, frowning. "It was probably the first thing the Covenant took offline. If we're going to survive, I'm going to have to outfly them. Everyone hold on!"

She quickly sent a transmission to Billy and the other children to hide in the sewers until she gave them the all-clear signal. When he acknowledged her order, Cortana veered the ship sharply to the left. The crew lurched to the side, but managed to hang on. Cortana swung the ship around and dodged two of the banshees. She only needed to avoid their fire for another thirty seconds.

A blast from behind shook the cabin.

"Direct hit," Johnson announced unhelpfully.

"Sealing off deck three," she said as she banked around again.

The banshees followed her new trajectory as she hoped. As she guided the ship towards the rock formation, she allowed herself a brief grin. Maybe they would get out of this alive.

She flew the Autumn past the Scorpion's position. As the Banshees came into firing range, she activated the Scorpion's rail gun. She circled around quickly enough to watch the three ships fall out of the air.

"Nice shootin'," complimented Johnson.

"Thanks," Cortana said before turning to the Chief. "I'll land the Autumn and then we'll load up the Scorpion." She smirked. "I think this will be the last time Ackerson underestimates us."

9. Crashing the Party: Part 1

Updated (3/12): Author Notes: No major edits. :D

* * *

><p>July 17, 2552 (Military Calendar)
>North America, Reach UNSC Military Complex,
Omega Wing-Section
Three secure facility**

"I take it you saw Jacob's request."

Terrence stepped into Catherine's lab, looking at all the various screens and tablets she had laying on her desks. She waited until he

pulled his gaze away from her work to answer. "You know I keep tabs on the two of them."

"Then you know I have approved their transfer."

Catherine nodded. Cortana and John were no longer a project under the umbrella of the ONI, but now active members of the UNSC's most elite special strike force: Alpha Team. "Did you already tell them?"

"Not yet. Though I suppose if you know, then Cortana already does."

The doctor ignored his comment. Her feigned ignorance on the AI's side activities had kept her out of trouble so far. "They are on their way here right now. We're working on some last minute upgrades to John's armor," Catherine said.

As if on cue, the doors to her lab slid apart. The two of them walked in tandem as they walked inside her lab. "I'm telling you, Chief, I have no idea how Ackerson got assigned to Hong Kong," Cortana said dryly as they entered Halsey's lab together.

"And the emails?"

"What can I say?" She shrugged. "Not every man is as noble as you."

It was John who noticed Lord Hood standing next to the doctor. He straightened up. "Sir! Ma'am!"

"At ease, Master Chief."

Cortana cast a smile in their direction. "I'm assuming we're here because of the memo that passed over your desk this morning."

Terrence looked at the doctor, unsurprised.

Catherine frowned slightly. It was one thing for Cortana to tell her about her hacking endeavors; it was another to fill the admiral in on those details. "The one that was marked 'For Eyes Only'?"

"Did it say that?" She looked at the admiral with wide, innocent eyes. "I only accessed the file because it had my serial number embedded in the file. I wanted to make sure I didn't miss any important orders."

Catherine knew the admiral didn't believe a word Cortana said, but he let the subject drop. He looked at the two of them closely. "Effective today, the two of you are assigned to Alpha Team."

John somehow straightened even more. "Thank you, sir!"

"You both earned it, Master Chief. You impressed Captain Keyes and a lot of the brass with what the two of you did with the rescue mission. Saving the _Autumn_ was no easy task." Terrence slid the tablet with the dossier across the table for him to read. "Here are your new orders."

Catherine watched as Cortana passed it to John as she wirelessly

accessed the file. Before Terrence came in, she had read the mission orders herself. Cortana wasn't the only one who knew how to hack into High Command's systems.

They were to take control of the main port in the Panama Canal. The Covenant forces were thin there, nearly a half-world away from the main center of the Covenant in Rome. While the leaders, the Prophets, didn't see South America as much more than a land mass they could control, the UNSC desperately needed that port so that ships would refuel and resupply without having to go around the entire continent.

Alpha Team was going to meet up with Noble Team in El Salvador to coordinate the double fronted attack. Although the Covenant didn't use the Panama Canal as an important hub, preliminary recon hinted of a database in their system. The Alpha Team was going to use a newly acquired Phantom and attempt to infiltrate the dropship that was stationed above the canal while the Noble Team tried to secure the canal.

"The two of you need to meet with Captain Keyes at 1600 hours."

"Understood, sir." Cortana flashed a smile at John. "Told you we'd get someone's attention."

The admiral started walking towards the door. "Good luck."

When the doors closed behind Terrence, Catherine looked at John. "John, you need to go to the main lab so you can get suited up while Cortana stays here to update the software to your HUD."

John nodded curtly and turned away.

"Don't miss me too much," Cortana called, not turning back to him.

He paused briefly, but didn't say anything back.

After the door closed, Cortana half-smiled at the doctor. "I'm determined to get him out of his shell."

Cortana had a better chance of expecting the Covenant to surrender to the UNSC, but Catherine didn't make a comment. Instead, she spun another monitor in the AI's direction. "I assume you've had time to review the latest software update."

The AI nodded her head. "I think streaming would be more effective if you stripped out several lines of redundant code. I know they are there for backup, but I'm less concerned with fail safes as I am with making sure our connection doesn't suffer due to the interference."

"How are the headaches?" the doctor asked, cutting to the heart of the issue.

Cortana had reported feeling headaches after her and John's last mission. When she boosted the signal between them over fifty percent, the link would cause an echo effect, causing the AI to have migraines. Catherine knew there was a possibility of that happening;

when they had returned from Reach, she and Cortana had worked together on creating a filter to screen out the unnecessary bounce back from the signal.

The AI waved off her question, annoyed. "Manageable. Nothing a couple of aspirin can't control. Besides," she said, nodding towards the computers, "with the latest batch of upgrades, that issue should resolve itself." Cortana must have noticed her reluctance to believe her. The AI crossed her arms. "We have time to run another simulation before I need to get to the _Autumn_. You'll see that everything will be fine, Doctor."

Catherine let out a long silent sigh at Cortana's stubbornness. She hoped for the sake of Cortana and John, the AI was right.

10. Crashing the Party: Part 2

****Updated (3/12): Author Notes: No major edits. :D****

* * *

><p>"I can't believe they hijacked a Phantom." She looked at John as he walked into the armory. "I've run the scans and it seems to still be in working order." She was impressed.<p>

John, however, seemed unsurprised. He gave a half-shrug. "Noble Team is one of the best teams in the UNSC," he pointed out.

"Well, it will make getting to the drop ship that much easier," Cortana said quietly. "I've already hacked into the Carrier's mainframe. Getting on the drop ship shouldn't be a problem. Getting off of it..." Her voice trailed off.

"We'll be fine." He slid on his helmet and Cortana saw the quick gold flash of his shield being activated.

She wished he had his optimism. Even with the relatively good intel they had on the ship's schematics, being stuck on a Covenant Cruiser nearly a mile above the ground was a dangerous situation.

She frowned. Why was she so worried? Certainly the mission to save the _Autumn_ had been more dangerous with them having no backup. She let out a frustrated sigh. Halsey. The doctor's concern had unnerved Cortana, but now was not the time to lose focus. Not when the mission was this dangerous.

He reached in the weapons locker and pulled out a pistol for her as she put on her much maligned flak jacket. She grabbed the butt of the firearm and slid it into her shoulder holster.

"Damn right, we'll be fine." Johnson walked up to the two of them with a smoldering cigar between his lips. "I don't know how things are over in the ONI, but Alpha Team doesn't do anything less than the best."

Cortana raised an eyebrow. "Then we'll fit right in."

Johnson's grin widened. "After what the two of you did with the _Autumn_, I'd say that's true." He grabbed an assault rifle and

nodded towards the exit. "The captain's waitin' in the cargo bay for us."

The three of them made the short trip to the small bay. Cortana saw the six-member Noble Team huddled together in the far corner of the room while Captain Keyes was standing by the Phantom, pipe in hand.

Cortana knew that the captain normally took a more active role in participating in the missions, but because of the two pronged attack, he was forced to stay behind in the _Autumn_ and make sure things flowed smoothly. Cortana watched him as he took in the three of them.

"I trust that all of the Covenant protocol has been uploaded to your matrix," he said to her without preamble.

Cortana nodded. "We'll be able to board the ship without a problem, sir."

"Noble Team is going to need some time to get to the control room, so discretion needs to be used. Carter will contact the _Autumn_ when his team has secured the area. If you run into any trouble..." His voice trailed off.

They were on their own.

Johnson huffed. "Then the Covenant are going to regret it."

Cortana allowed herself a brief smile. Johnson certainly added some sprightliness to the conversation.

Keyes nodded. "Good luck, Alpha Team."

She led the two men to the Covenant vessel and sat in the pilot's chair. When Johnson and the Chief were situated, she disembarked from the _Autumn_. She piloted the craft several miles away from the ship's position before tapping the controls, sending out a transmission signal to the Cruiser.

As they approached the Assault Carrier, they were granted docking clearance.

"The secondary hub should be here," Cortana said, pointing at the holographic layout of the ship. "I'll access the database from there."

John nodded. "Johnson and I will secure the quadrant."

Seconds later, the system's controls were overridden by the Cruiser. "Now we just sit back and wait."

She looked out the Phantom's windows and saw nearly three dozen Ghosts, Banshees and Phantoms going back and forth from the large vessel. She hoped with the high amount of traffic, their Phantom wouldn't cause any sense of alarm. According to her calculations, Noble Team was going to need the better part of an hour to secure the base below them.

The ship glided into a docking bay. "Purple, huh?" Johnson said,

looking at the walls around them. "Somehow I didn't picture the place looking so damn cheery."

Cortana saw three Grunts, who were busy talking to each other. She scanned the room for any other hostiles, but the bumbling soldiers were the only security in the room.

"It's almost too easy," Johnson said as the Phantom settled on the ground. "You'd think they weren't expecting company."

Cortana released the rear hatch. The three of them slipped out of the ship and crept to the darkened corner of the room. The Grunts didn't look in their direction.

"I've got this." John pulled out his pistol, his eyes never leaving the targets in the room.

Three Grunts against a single-minded Spartan? They didn't stand a chance.

Johnson nodded towards the cargo containers. Cortana followed the sergeant as they watched John silently make his way to the first unsuspecting Grunt.

His method was quick and effective. In less than a minute, there were no Grunts left alive in the room. He gestured for them to move forward to the large doors.

Together, they made their way through the assault carrier. They avoided the patrols easily; the Covenant were not expecting the UNSC's finest to board their ship. The ride down the gravlift was unmemorable.

"Think they are all sleeping?" Johnson asked, snickering.

At the intersection, John carefully looked around the corridor before pulling back and held up two fingers. She watched as he aimed his pistol and fired twice. The three of them made their way to the single door at the end of the hall. Johnson pulled out his snake cam as Cortana hacked into the console.

"It's clear."

Within a second, she hacked the security code and the locks to the doors released. John opened the door and allowed Cortana to walk in. She gasped slightly.

This was what they had been looking for.

Several dozen large computers towers, three meters high, were in the center of the room. Lights flashed, fans hummed. Cortana could almost feel the power course through her.

"Bingo." She was unable to keep the excitement out of her voice.

Johnson let out a long whistle.

"I'll take it from here," Cortana said as she approached the database. "You two should be able to reach the armory and find some

goodies to take back to ONI there."

"Are you sure you'll be alright?"

Cortana looked at John, surprised by his question. Why if she didn't know any better, she would have thought he was openly concerned for her.

"Well, I have gotten used to having a Spartan bodyguard, but I think I can manage." She offered him a smile. "Infiltrating the security grid will be my first priority. If I sense any trouble, I'll transfer out of the system."

He seemed to hesitate briefly, but before she could say anything he nodded. She watched the two of them leave the room before transferring herself into the ship's systems.

Suddenly, the world exploded in ones and zeroes around her. Though she preferred the flexibility to move around in her human body, Cortana felt at home in the data stream of information.

Schematics of various bases, planned attacks, and the hierarchy structure of the Covenant...all of it and more were at Cortana's fingertips. Greedily, she amassed all the data she could find.

Within seconds, she had full access to the ship's security grid. She spun off a subroutine to monitor John and Johnson's progress. She was tempted to open a channel to John, but decided against it. She didn't need to advertise the fact she was in the database.

Terabytes of information came rushing into her matrices. She noticed that most of the information was new and unknown. The information she was processing would allow give the UNSC a desperately needed advantage over the Covenant.

Cortana nearly lost track of time as she categorized each data cluster that she uploaded. As she continued making her way through the information, a disturbing piece of data streamed by her. Quickly, she accessed it.

She froze as the irrefutable data plainly presented itself. It was impossible, she thought. But, as she hacked and accessed the security camera from the hangars, one sinking truth stuck out.

They had been discovered.

She opened a comm channel to John. "We need to get out of here. Now."

11. Crashing the Party: Part 3

****Updated (3/12): Author Notes: No major edits. :D****

****Original notes:**** **I've got a bigger chapter this time around...and expect more of these from me. I'm determined to get this sucker posted in its entirety before I start posting my other Halo AU (which is much more traditional...there are aliens, Cortana's not human, etc.). As always, thanks for coming along for the ride.

:D**

* * *

><p>"Let me guess. Someone finally figured that we've crashed their pad?" Johnson looked at the Chief knowingly.<p>

John nodded before speaking to Cortana. "What's going on?"

"_They've got an Elite special forces team headed to both of our positions_." Her voice came out of his helmet speakers.

"Damn it," Johnson grumbled.

"_I've already transferred out of the system. Their ETA is in five minutes. You need to get back to the Phantom before they lock down the cargo bays_."

"What about you?"

"_I'm going to have to improvise_."

John frowned at the snag in the mission.

"_They are closer to my location and I can't see a way back to the Phantom, but I think there is an emergency bay available,_" explained Cortana. "_I'll keep you updated_."

"Were you able to get all the data?"

"_Of course_." She sounded almost offended at the idea that she hadn't completed her mission.

The comm channel closed and John focused on escaping the Cruiser. He and Johnson started backtracking in the direction from which they came.

As they approached the gravlift, John noticed a half dozen Covenant on the pad. The Elite's light-bending armor made them almost invisible, but John had learned long ago how to detect the clocked soldiers. "I'm counting four hostiles."

Johnson looked closely before nodding. "I see the bastards."

Before the Elites stepped off the elevator, the two men fired. The quick secession of the shots caused the cloaking device to malfunction. The three Covenant soldiers stood there exposed. Their black armor, sleeker and less bulky, than John's almost seemed to glisten in the ship's light.

The Elites ignored the damage they had taken and wasted no time in firing at the two UNSC officers. John tucked and rolled away from the gunfire while Johnson hid himself behind the closest wall. John watched his shield levels go down as he took a couple of shots from the plasma rifle.

The Spartan fired his assault rifle at the Elites. Johnson gave him covering fire, allowing John to pull out a plasma grenade. He pulled the pin and held it in his hands for two seconds before hurling it in the soldiers' direction.

It stuck on the Elite closest to him.

The two other Elites tried to escape, but there wasn't enough time for them to take cover. John ducked slightly as the grenade went off. Bodies flew from the force of the explosion.

"Not bad," Johnson replied, as he made his way to the Spartan. Together, they crossed the room to the gravlift. "I hope it still works after all we put it through," the sergeant said as they stepped over the fallen Covenant soldiers.

John said nothing as he pushed the holographic console in the center of the lift. To his relief, the unit started moving upwards. Several seconds later the lift stopped and he and Johnson disembarked from the lift. He raised his rifle, looking for any other Covenant.

As they started going down the path Cortana had marked, her voice cut through the comm channel. "They are anticipating for you to go that way, Chief. I'm uploading a new route to you now." Her voice sounded tense.

"Everything alright?"

"It's nothing a couple of painkillers on the _Autumn _won't fix."

John's eyebrows pressed together. She was still having headaches? The new buffer she and Doctor Halsey had been working on was supposed to prevent that from happening.

The new destination point that appeared on his HUD distracted him from pursuing their conversation any further. "This way."

He led Johnson to an access door which slid apart. Inside, there was a long, narrow corridor. Johnson looked around the Chief and frowned. "You think you're gonna fit in there?"

It was going to be a tight fit, but John knew that Cortana wouldn't have given him this path unless she knew that he would be able to use it. "I'm sure."

"I'm going first." Johnson stepped forward. "No offense, Chief, but if you get stuck I don't wanna be trapped here with you."

The passage was filled with curves and dead ends, but Cortana's careful planning kept them from getting lost in the vast corridors. Finally, they reached the end of the passage. John tapped the console to release the door.

Nothing happened.

He tried again, but the panel didn't respond.

He closed his eyes briefly, wondering what Cortana was doing.

To his surprise, as he concentrated on the AI, a fuzzy image filled his mind. An Elite was shooting in his direction. A slender, decidedly female, arm came into view. It was holding a pistol. Four shots were fired in quick succession. John watched at the prized

soldiers slithered to the floor.

It took him several seconds to realize he was seeing through Cortana's eyes.

He pulled his thoughts away from the AI and their link. What this part of the new software they had integrated into his armor? Or was this a side effect they hadn't been expecting?

Before he could ask any more questions, Johnson spoke up. "Chief, I think we might be having some company."

John listened. The sound of the Covenant's footsteps echoed throughout the corridor.

"Cortana, we're boxed in."

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So was she.

Cortana ducked behind a corridor and waited for the frag grenade to explode. She stormed past the remaining Grunts and set the security locks in the emergency cargo bay she had found. Convinced that, for the time being she was safe, she turned her focus on trying to get John and Johnson to the cargo bay.

She transferred her primary system to John's armor and started hacking the system. "All right, I'm in," Cortana said.

She tried to break through the firewall, but the Covenant had an adapting-encryption program. They were smarter than what she had thought, but still no match to her. The only flaw was that she needed to boost the signal between her and John so that she could transfer more of her subroutines to the console. She calculated the risk and before she could second guess herself, Cortana pushed the link to the maximum level.

Her eyes slammed shut as pain pummeled into her skull. A burst of ones and zeroes scrolled before her eyes.

"Chief..." she whispered.

Her host body was sluggishly responding to commands from her neural lace. She staggered forward, nearly tripping over her feet. She leaned against the wall in reprieve as she focused on the carrier's security system.

There.

The encryption file was in front of her, silently challenging her to decipher it. She was going to delete the code line by line. Unfortunately, the pain coursing through her nervous system bogged down her ability to quickly delete the code.

She pushed aside her pain and focused solely on the security code. She ignored through the superfluous lines of code and focused on accessing the firewall directly. Trillions of characters came whizzing passed her as she continued the hack.

Her subroutines were screaming at her to terminate the link, that there was a fifty-seven percent chance of lasting nerve damage to her brain. But she couldn't let John and Johnson down, couldn't let the mission fail.

"_Cortana_?"

"I'm doing the best I can," she hissed.

She vaguely registered that she was about to pass out. The intensity of the pain made it nearly impossible for her to concentrate on anything outside of the code she was trying to crack. She pushed herself forward and finally managed to hack the code.

"Hurry, John. They're sending out more strike forces."

"_Understood_."

She quickly terminated the link and allowed herself the relief of no longer feeling the intense pain as she transferred herself back to her main matrix chip. Doctor Halsey and she were going to have some things to discuss when she returned to Reach.

As the worse of the headache started to fade away, Cortana saw her means of escape: a row of Banshees was before her. Cortana walked to the closest Banshee and climbed inside.

It was certainly snug, but the knowledge that her life was in grave danger silenced her irrational fears of claustrophobia. She activated the bay doors as the engines purred to life. She accessed John's position and noted with satisfaction that they had made it back to the hangar and were preparing to board the Phantom.

"The _Autumn_'s position is marked on your HUD."

The Banshee screamed out of the cargo bay. Cortana was tossed around the cabin as a shot from the assault carrier nicked the ship. "I guess they're going to miss us," she muttered.

"_Get to the_ Autumn. _We'll hold off the carrier_."

Cortana was tempted to argue with the Chief. Her pride didn't like the fact that she needed anyone's help, even John's. But, the information that she held would help the UNSC in their fight. Her safety was the priority right now.

"Be careful, Chief." She piloted the unfamiliar craft in an unpredictable flight pattern. She zigged and zagged through the air as the carrier unsuccessfully shot at her.

She frowned as she monitored the Chief's position. They were far too close to the Covenant ship. "You might want to--"

The assault carrier aimed at the Phantom and fired its deadly plasma weapons. The stolen craft started spiraling towards the ground, smoke pluming from the cabin. Despite the damage it had taken, the Phantom's passengers would survive the fall, Cortana calculated as she dodged another attack.

Now that she had no more support, Cortana did her best to avoid the attack, but the gunman on the carrier was too skilled and the Banshee was too easy of a target. A direct hit from the plasma beam caused the Banshee to spin violently. Cortana could barely get her bearings and she tumbled around the small cabin.

She wasn't going to survive this, she grasped with a sickening realization.

The only chance she had was to attempt to pilot the fallen Banshee in the water and hope the air-tight lock of the shell would hold at the impact.

John would save her.

She issued several commands. The failing engines struggled to respond, but after several attempts, the engine started pulling to the east. She closed her eyes as the ground came racing towards her. There were only a few seconds before impact.

The ship slammed on the top of the water. Cortana's head slammed in the back of the Banshee.

Then, everything went black.

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John slowly opened his eyes. His shields were squealing, his head was roaring, but no was no humming in the back of his mind.

Cortana.

He opened a comm channel to her, but got no response. He forced himself to push himself from the wreckage of the Phantom. Johnson lay semi-conscious on what remained on the passenger seat.

"Johnson."

The older man twitched.

"We need to get out of here." And he needed to figure out where Cortana was.

He jostled Johnson's shoulder slightly. Finally, he started to move under his fingers. He sat up and coughed, blood spattering the destroyed controls. "Hell of a landing there, Chief."

"Are you going to be alright?"

Johnson winced as he pulled himself upright. "Of course. I went through worse going through basic training."

John took in his appearance. He was bloodied and a little shaken, but he didn't seem to have any major injuries. "You need to get back to the _Autumn_."

Johnson's brows furrowed. "Where are you going to be?"

"I can't contact Cortana."

Johnson swore under his breath. "You think the Covenant shot her down?"

"Maybe."

Johnson clasped the Chief's shoulder. "All right, but Chief?" He handed him his assault rifle. "Here on Alpha Team we stick together. We're going to look for her."

John nodded as they walked away from the wreckage. He closed his eyes and tried again to establish some kind of link with Cortana, but he was unable to duplicate his ability to "see" through Cortana's eyes as he had on the ship.

He needed to let Keyes know. He opened a comm channel to the _Autumn_. "Sir, we have a situation here."

"_I know. We're uploading Cortana's position to your HUD now_." There was a long pause. Finally, Keyes spoke again. "_You and Johnson proceed with finding her. Now that Noble Team has secured the area on the ground, I've got Noble Two headed to the assault cruiser. She's going to give the Covenant a little surprise._"

Keyes sighed. "You need to find Cortana, Chief."

John knew he did. "Yes, sir."

They carefully made their way through the rocky coastline. As they approached the position, John realized that signal was coming from the water. He paused their trek. Johnson followed his gaze out of the choppy ocean.

"She's out there, isn't she?"

John scanned the water. There. Approximately ten meters from the coast, he saw a Banshee floating in the water. "Cortana, please respond."

Silence.

He took a step in the direction of the ocean. Johnson put a hand on his chest. "I didn't think Spartans could swim." Technically, Johnson was right. The weight of the armor made swimming a difficult prospect, but John would do what it took to get Cortana off the ship.

"Here." Johnson thrust his rifle at him. "You hold this and I'll get Cortana."

John frowned as he considered Johnson's offer.

"I'm not going to lose her, Chief."

Finally, he nodded. John stayed alert for any random Covenant while he watched Johnson swim in the dark waters. The sergeant moved swiftly and reached the Banshee without incident. John watched as he gingerly lifted Cortana, who seemed unresponsive, into his arms.

With practiced ease, Johnson started swimming back to shore with the AI in his arms. As he approached John, he looked at the Spartan remorsefully. "I don't know, Chief."

He placed her on carefully on the ground, allowing John to look at her. Her face was smeared with blood; pieces of glass were embedded in several long cuts across her jaw. Her eyelids were fluttering, her mouth was moving imperceptibly.

"Cortana?"

Her eyelids opened slightly and she started to speak. "Sierra-117, UNSC AI CTN0452-9 has sustained catastrophic damage to data clusters 100.123-795.98. Suggested course of action: activate killswitch. Proceed?"

John's gut tightened. "Negative," he told the AI. He turned to Johnson. "We need to get her to the Autumn."

Johnson took point as John scooped her from the ground. They cautiously made their way to the hidden vessel. The half-mile hike took much longer than John anticipated. He looked up at the Battlecruiser that hovered overhead, wondering what Noble Two had planned.

As they got close to the ship, John tilted his head to Cortana who was still unresponsive. Johnson looked at her before nodding towards the direction of the Autumn. "Come on, Chief. The captain already has Doctor Halsey on a comm channel."

They crossed the wide field. When they got close, the light shifted as the Autumn decloaked and came into view. Captain Keyes stood on the loading platform. A deep frown passed over his lips as he took in the sight of Johnson and Cortana. "We've got Med Bay two ready for you two," he said to the sergeant.

Keyes looked out towards the Battlecruiser and frowned. "Sir?"

"There have been some complications, Chief." He twisted the pipe in his hands. "It's in Noble Team's hands now."

Another snag in the mission, John thought with a frown and he and Johnson made their way to the medical room. He laid Cortana on the closest examination table, Johnson didn't bother sitting down. He rummaged through the drawers and pulled out several medical supplies.

As soon as John released Cortana, the screen to the side of her bed activated.

It was Doctor Halsey. She looked at Cortana through the video feed and frowned deeply. "What happened, John?"

John described as best he could what had happened after they had fled from the cruiser.

When he was finished, Halsey sighed. "I need you to remove the chip from her neural lace, John."

He hesitated briefly. _Wouldn't that kill Cortana?_

"She'll be fine," Halsey replied, picking up on the Spartan's thoughts.

Carefully, he rolled Cortana to the side. John reached around and pushed her hair out of the way, giving him access to Cortana's neural lace. He pressed the release and the chip slid into the palm of his hand.

It was had a deep crack running through it.

John didn't miss the panicked look that flickered over Halsey's face when he held the chip up for her to inspect. "Will she be alright?"

Halsey pressed her lips together. "I don't know, John." She pushed her glasses up. "I don't know."

12. Crashing the Party: Part 4

****Updated (3/12): Author Notes: No major edits. :D****

* * *

><p>It had been three weeks.<p>

Three weeks since the death of Noble Six. Three weeks since the Panama port had been secured by the Alpha and Noble teams, offering hope to the war-wearied soldiers in the UNSC. Three weeks since he had found Cortana floating unconscious in a nearly destroyed Banshee, hoping that Cortana would be able to recover from her injury.

John and the rest of Alpha Team, along with Cortana's temporary replacement, Noble Two, had returned to Reach earlier in the day. As he had finished his debriefing with Lord Hood, Halsey had contacted him, requesting for him to stop by her lab.

It had to be about Cortana.

He made his way through the ONI building, stopping at various security checkpoints. Cortana had been locked away since her arrival on Reach; neither he nor any of the other members of Alpha Team had been able to see her. Halsey had contacted him once, two days after her crash, to inform him that Cortana would survive, but it would take time to repair the damage that had been done to her matrix chip.

It was quiet in his mind; the hum he had come to associate with the AI had been unnervingly quiet.

His heavy boots echoed down the near-empty hallway. There were few people here; each of them looked at him suspiciously until they took in his name and recognized who he was. At the end of the hall, Doctor Halsey stood, waiting for him.

When he approached her, she accessed the security panel next to the large double doors. John waited as the computer ran a retinal scan. The locks released and Halsey walked forward with John following her.

"We're ready to reestablish the link between the matrix chip and Cortana's host body," she said, approaching another security door with a small window. John saw a woman lying on the bed in the center of the room. Cortana. "But, with the shard in your neural lace, we need you here in case there are any complications."

Together they walked into the room. John looked at the still form of Cortana on the bed. In many ways, she looked worse than she had when he and Johnson had first found her. Her black hair stood out starkly compared to her pale face and lips. Her cheeks were hollowed. Halsey had done her best to mend her wounds, but there was still a long, raw scar running across Cortana's jawbone.

She looked frail.

The doctor allowed John several more seconds to look at the AI before she reached for her tablet that was on the table next to Cortana's bed. The door opened again as one of her techs stepped into the room. "Are you ready, Doctor?"

Halsey nodded. "Yes." She turned to face John. "We are going to monitor your vitals closely during the activation. Though the buffers Cortana and I created are still in place, we don't know how they will work with the damaged chip." She pointed to the chair next to the bed. "Do you want to take a seat?"

"I'll be fine."

"Very well," she said before tapping in several commands on her tablet. She nodded to the tech who started working on her own computer.

John remained motionless as he waited for the women to finish the final preparations. "PSI wave patterns have been synced, Doctor. We're ready when you are."

Halsey looked at John before turning her gaze to Cortana. The silence from the AI was disturbing to John. He wondered if it was as strange for the doctor.

"Activating the neural link."

Instantly, John felt liquid ice pour in his skull and a familiar hum in the back of his mind. He resisted the urge to stumble forward at the intensity of the link and grabbed the railing on the edge of Cortana's bed.

"John?" Halsey asked, concern entering into her voice.

"I can feel the link again," he said.

"A promising sign," Halsey said with a small smile. "It will take a while for the link to fully establish itself, but so far there is nothing to indicate her host is rejecting the chip." She stood up with her tablet. "I should inform Lord Hood of her condition." She led her tech out of the room and left John alone with Cortana.

He looked at the woman in front of him, looking for any signs that she was waking.

There were none.

There was nothing for the Spartan to do but wait for Cortana to wake up or Halsey to return.

Nearly ten minutes passed before John saw her right hand twitch slightly. He took two steps to stand next to her bed. "John?" Her voice was raspy, raw.

"Yes."

She opened her eyes slightly and gave him a small smile. "Miss me much?"

It was meant in jest, but the playful question reminded John how much he had missed her over the past three weeks. "How are you feeling?" he asked, deflecting her question.

"Confused. Which for an AI is not a good thing," Cortana retorted. She looked around and took in her surroundings. "How did I get back on Reach?"

He shifted slightly. "I'd better let Doctor Halsey tell you."

"Keeping secrets?" she asked, slightly annoyed. "Can you at least tell me how long I've been here?"

"Three weeks."

"What?" Cortana pushed up weakly, trying to sit up. She looked at him, her blue eyes panicked. "How is that possible?"

He was saved from answering her question when the door opened. Halsey walked in and appraised the AI. "Cortana," the doctor greeted with a rare smile.

John knew that Cortana was in not in a mood for chit chat. She pinned the doctor with a glare. "I've been here for three weeks? Why don't I have any recollection of that time?"

The doctor didn't waste any time in answering her questions. "When you crashed landed in the canal, you slammed your head and damaged your matrix chip. You were practically non-responsive when they found you. Your systems immediately went into standby mode. When you were brought back, the techs and I spent nearly two weeks repairing the damage done to your chip. It was touch and go for a while, but we managed to repair most of the damage."

"Most?"

Halsey frowned slightly. "There will be some noticeable lag in your core processes, but you are still the most advanced AI we had in the fleet."

Cortana pressed her eyebrows together.

The doctor pressed forward. "High Command didn't want to risk losing the information you had obtained, so they insisted that all data acquired from the mission was to be transferred to ONI before we

could reunite your matrix chip to your host body." She stepped forward and placed a hand on Cortana's arm.

"You're lucky to be alive," she said softly before straightening. "I know you're going to be eager to get back on your feet, but you won't be cleared by ONI until we make sure that everything with your system is green. They have ordered a full-scale analysis of your programming."

"Wonderful," she said dryly.

"Kat has been temporarily assigned on Alpha Team until you are given clearance," Halsey continued.

Cortana frowned. John knew she didn't like the idea of being replaced.

"If all goes well, you should be active within a week," Halsey continued. "I'll give you access to your files. No need to waste your energy on hacking into the database," Halsey said before walking out of the room.

John watched her as she experimentally moved. "Lucky, huh?" she said dryly.

The image of her lifeless body as he carried her back to the Autumn came to his mind. She should have been dead. "We didn't think you were going to make it when I found you," John said.

"You found me?" she asked, interested. He waited several seconds as she undoubtedly accessed his mission logs from Panama. "You did miss me," she accused.

He didn't refute her claim.

"Thank you for saving my life," she said, reaching out and grabbing his hand. She gave it a squeeze.

A voice in the back of his head warned him not to get too close, to pull away from the desire to think of Cortana beyond the boundaries of a fellow soldier. But, as he stepped back and allowed her hand to fall back to her bed, he wasn't sure if that was a battle he could-or wanted-to fight.

Finally, he gave her hand a squeeze back. "You're welcome, Cortana."

13. Playing Defense: Part 1

****Updated (3/12): Author Notes: This is the completely new section. Read and enjoy! :D :D**
>

* * *

><p>2345 Hours, August 26, 2552 (Military Calendar)
>North America, Reach UNSC Military
Complex,
Barracks**

"_John_."

Cortana's voice cut through his sleep-deprived mind. It had been nearly two days since John had been able to sleep and if Cortana's interruption was any indication, he would have to wait longer to get some rest.

He rolled on his side and opened his eyes, attempting to clear his mind of exhaustion. "Go ahead."

"_Get suited up and meet us in the hangar ASAP._"

If Cortana's lack of sarcasm wasn't clue enough to the seriousness of the situation, his orders were. He was only given clearance to wear his armor during high-priority missions.

"What happened?" he asked as he made his way down the hallway. People were bustling around the base; there was too much activity at three in the morning.

"_We've detected Covenant movement in New York._"

John halted his walk. New York? That was only 200 miles from Reach. The only comfort that John had was knowing that it was a well-fortified city with a half-dozen MAC guns and thousands of UNSC troops stationed there to protect the million civilians that called New York City their home.

Still, it unnerved him that the Covenant would make such a bold move. How had the UNSC managed to miss the intel that the enemy was crossing into their territory?

"Have they started glassing the city?" he asked. The tension in his voice was heavy.

"_No._"

Her answer caught him off-guard. Normally the Covenant wasted no time in destroying the cities they invaded.

"_There is nothing normal about this entire situation, Chief._" He could hear the annoyance in her voice. "_The Omega Team noticed something strange during their watch. They only detected about a dozen or so Covenant and they were only focused on one building, the New York Public Library._"

He approached the waiting Jeep. He nodded to the driver as he stepped in. The young soldier pressed on the gas and drove towards the ONI building.

"_High Command wants to know why they are there which is where we come in. They're after something, John and we're going to find out what it is._"

"Do you think it's Forerunner?"

The soldier glanced at him in surprise out of the corner of his eye. The Chief looked forward.

"_Probably. It's the only thing that would compel them to approach

NYC. I'm going to continue to try to access their battle net. If they are talking to each other, I want to know what they are saying_."

"Understood."

The rest of the drive was silent. The soldier saluted to John as he stepped out of the jeep. John returned the gesture before facing the ONI building.

Doctor Halsey was waiting for him on the main floor. She escorted him past security to her main lab. Three lab assistants stood waiting in the room. Cortana, however, was nowhere to be found.

"Cortana was in the middle with Lord Hood when the transmission came in," Halsey explained, not waiting for him to ask about her. She looked him over carefully. "How are you feeling, John?"

"Fine, ma'am." He didn't want to comment on his exhaustion.

"According to Captain Keyes, you haven't slept in nearly two days."

John said nothing.

Halsey pressed her lips together, the only sign of her annoyance. "I'm giving you a stimulant. It should keep you awake for at least another forty-eight hours."

John would have protested if he wasn't so tired. Stimulants, while effective, had the inconvenient side effect of causing the user to crash for twelve hours once the drug wore off.

She injected him with the syringe then nodded to her techs. Halsey kept her eyes on her tablet as the others assisted John to donning his armor, giving him some privacy.

When they finished, he picked up his helmet from the table next to her. She gave him a thoughtful glance.

"Ma'am?"

Her shoulders drooped slightly. "I have a request for you, John. More of a favor, if you will."

He considered the woman who had given his life purpose when she brought him into the Spartan program decades ago. Short of defying a direct order from High Command, he would do anything for her. "What is it?"

She lowered her voice. "Keep an eye on Cortana. I fear she is still eager to push herself too hard, too quickly." She drew in a deep breath. "I want you to make sure she doesn't do anything too rash to try to prove to everyone that she hasn't changed since Panama."

An unexpected emotion-guilt-pervaded John's mind. Though he knew he had done nothing wrong in Panama, he still felt responsible for not being able to lure the Covenant fire from Cortana and the stolen data long enough for her to escape.

"She is headstrong to a fault," Halsey continued, unaware of his inner turmoil. A chagrined look passed over her face. "I suppose she isn't entirely to blame for that. There aren't many people she is willing to listen to, but she will listen to you."

John didn't know why that made a swirl of emotions swirl through him. He pushed them aside and forced himself to think of the mission at hand. Even without Halsey's request, John had promised to himself that Cortana would be safe on the battlefield, no matter the sacrifice. "I will, ma'am." He slid the helmet over his head.

She nodded, satisfied with his promise. "Good luck, Master Chief."

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There were too many unknown variables in this situation and Cortana hated it.

They had arrived at the command post five minutes ago and had been debriefed of the situation. Reports from the surveillance teams said that the Covenant strike team hadn't left the building.

It had been ninety minutes since the Covenant presence was discovered, plenty of time for them to get the upper-hand in a close quarters battle.

Keyes bit the lip of his pipe, leaning towards the holographic image of the city's main library. "Why do I get the feeling that the odds are stacked against us?"

"Because they are." Johnson frowned.

Security cameras had documented the Covenant enter the section of the building that was under Bryant Park. It had been closed to the public for over a hundred years due to the structural damage it had taken during the Inner Colony War of 2427. The entrance to that portion of the library was being guarded by two Elites who were standing at the threshold of the old wing.

There was no other obvious way of entering that area without direct contact with the Covenant. Which meant Cortana needed to get creative.

She accessed all of the maps of New York City's underground that the UNSC had on file. "We could gain access to the building through the archaic subway lines. We would have to walk several blocks though." Cortana positioned an overlay of the old public transits tunnels over the map of the library. "If we go here," she said, pointing to the left side, "we should be able to find an access tunnel that will give us entrance into the lower levels."

Keyes glanced at Cortana. "How stable are those tunnels?"

The AI shrugged. "There is a sixty percent degradation of structural integrity, but there haven't been any recent cave-ins." She looked up at the captain. "It's our only option unless you want to have a major firefight on our hands."

"Alright," the captain sighed. He straightened. "Let's get these bastards out of our city."

It didn't take long for Cortana to wish she had found another way to gain access to the lower levels of the library. They had been walking underground for ten minutes. The air was stale; the rubble and rocks slid around them as they progressed further into the tunnel system. She forced herself to remain calm; she had a job and her claustrophobia wouldn't get in her way.

Johnson and Keyes took the lead while Cortana walked beside John. So far he hadn't asked how she was managing being in such a tight place. She wasn't sure if it was because he was being his normal stoic self or because he was exhausted.

She studied him for several seconds. His stride was steady, his posture perfect. He showed no outward signs of fatigue.

"She gave you a stim, huh?"

He hesitated a moment before giving her a slight nod. "Yes."

"You must have been more tired than you let on," Cortana noted. She knew John's disdain for any type of medication that had major side effects.

"How are you doing?"

"Fine. I was able to sleep and get a cup of coffee."

"I was talking about-"

He wasn't able to finish his sentence. The top of the tunnel began to tremble as the loud roar of a collapse filled the air. Cortana noticed the ceiling starting to crumble near Keyes and Johnson's location. "Watch out!" she cried.

They started to run, but they were moving too slow. They were going to get crushed by the debris.

Suddenly, a blur of motion ran passed her. John moved as quickly as she had ever seen him. As he raced forward, he pushed the two men beyond the debris pile.

Cortana allowed herself a small sigh of relief when the data from John's armor showed that all three men had survived the collapse. But there was one very significant problem.

The rock and wreckage blocked the path ahead of her.

"_Cortana, are you alright_?" She caught the concern in John's voice.

"I'm fine, but I don't see how I'm getting through." She carefully approached the pile, shining her flashlight over the debris. In the top corner there was a small opening. She calculated the dimensions and figured that she could fit through the small hole. Barely.

She needed to come up with another solution.

"Cortana?" Keyes' voice floated in the air.

Damn. They were under a strict time limit; she didn't have time to double-back and find another way into the library. "There is a small opening in the rubble. I should be able to climb through."

She watched as the light from John's helmet shine through the hole. "There's no way you're getting through that."

Thanks for the encouragement, Johnson, she thought sarcastically.

"I might need a little help getting all the way through, but according to my calculations, I should fit." She berated herself for the tremor in her voice.

"_I can try to remove some of the rubble_," John's voice spoke via their comm channel.

"No, you can't," she sighed. "The structural integrity is too weak already. We can't risk a further cave-in." She swallowed, forcing her heart rate to slow. "I can do this."

There was a long two second pause. "_What do you need me to do?_"

"Just give me a hand when I reach the other side."

"_Understood._"

Cortana drew in a long breath and eyed the pile of fallen debris. She would be able to climb up and hoist herself through the opening. She would have to shimmy several feet through the rubble until she reached the other side. Without letting her fears voice their concerns, she approached the remains of the collapsed tunnel.

The broken cement crumbled and shifted as she took her first step on the pile. She reached up to the opening; her hand slipped as the dirt crumbled in her grasp. She tucked the flashlight in her vest pocket and looked ahead to where John's light was shining.

She could do this.

Cortana grabbed a hold of a large chunk of cement and pulled herself in the hole. Almost instantly, her pulse spiked and her breathing became shallow. She told herself to just move forward, but she found herself paralyzed by the idea of moving forward.

Her alpha directive was doing its best to silence her fears: there was a mission to complete and she needed to get to where the rest of her team were waiting for her.

She silenced the command with an impatient mental shove.

She closed her eyes briefly and willed her breathing to slow. Once she was confident that she wasn't going to hyperventilate, she pushed herself to move her arms. She belly crawled through the small opening, not opening her eyes.

The dirt that surrounded her sprinkled down around her. She coughed as the particles entered her lungs. Her stomach muscles barely had room to move as she attempted to control the spasms in her throat. She hit her head on the top on the passage as the worst of her coughing subsided.

That was when she opened her eyes.

Which was a major error on her part. She had gone far enough in the opening to get herself wedged between both sides. There was no easy way to go forward or backwards.

"_Are you alright?_" John's voice was laced with concern.

She was fine! She was not some average human with irrational fears! She was the technological achievement of the UNSC!

She was terrified.

"No." It was barely more than a whisper.

Instead of feeling weaker, Cortana almost felt empowered by her admission. How many humans had faced frightening situations and become better because of it? How many had those men waiting for her done the same thing?

She looked ahead and saw the bright lights of John's helmet. She only had several more feet and she would be out of this premature grave. Keeping her eyes trained on the glow, she drew in a long breath and held it. She continued her slow trek forward. When she needed to breathe, she paused, collected another breath and moved ahead.

Finally, she reached the other side. Unlike where she had come from, there was not a slope of debris to climb down, but a sheer drop eight feet to the ground. She pushed her hands forward and held them out, lowering them as much as she was able. "I'm going to need some help."

She felt the fingertips rub across her palm. Then she felt a large, calloused hand -Keyes'- wrap around her left. Another hand -Johnson's- grabbed her right.

"We're gonna get you out of there," Keyes assured her. He looked over at John. "You got her?"

"Yes, sir."

On their private comm, "_I'm not going to let you fall._"

It was an uncharacteristic assurance; Cortana must have taken longer to navigate through the opening than she had realized. Or _maybe_ he was truly concerned about her welfare.

Either way, she knew that he would keep his word.

"One. Two. Three." Keyes and Johnson tugged on Cortana's arms. She felt the pockets of her vest snag in the rocks, but they managed to pull her far enough out of the rubble to where John could grab her. His hands steadied her as he lowered her back to solid ground.

Keyes gave her a once-over and nodded. She had passed his visual inspection. "Let's go."

Cortana let out a long breath. They would have to find another way back to the command post; even if the other men could have fit through the opening, she doubted she could convince herself to go through that again.

She tilted her head up. John was looking at her. One second passed. Then another. And another.

Then, without a word, he turned and started walking with Keyes.

What was that all about?

She let the unspoken question drift to the back of her matrix. There would be time to analyze John's behavior later. Right now, they had a mission to complete.

14. Playing Defense: Part 2

****Updated (3/12): Author Notes: This is the completely new section. Read and enjoy! :D :D**
>

* * *

><p>It took another twenty minutes, but, with Cortana's directions, they had finally reached the library basement. John took point as the others followed him. The dim lights allowed him to turn off his helmet's as they made their way down the long corridor.<p>

Suddenly, a deep voice cut through the air. "He is moving too slowly, Vadam! We are running out of time."

John froze.

A calm voice responded, "If this building had been infiltrated, we would have been alerted to their presence by the others. I trust that he is working as fast as he is able." The voice turned away from where they were standing. "How much longer?"

Another voice, much more nervous than the first two, stuttered, "It will take another thirty minutes to decrypt the data and another fifteen to upload it."

"Very well."

John looked back at Keyes. He was looking at Cortana questioningly. There were times such as these when her ability to relay a transmission over their comm channels wordlessly was a valuable asset.

"_Based on the video feed I'm getting, there are only three Covenant on this level_,," she said over the team's comm. "_I would suggest we allow the Chief to handle them_."

"Agreed," Keyes whispered. He faced John. "No lethal force. I want their sorry asses dragged out of here and back to High Command to find out what the hell they are doing there."

"Understood."

He crept along the poorly lit wall, silently stalking his prey. Once he reached the corner, he stepped from the shadows and grabbed his assault rifle. He slowly moved forward until he was able to see his targets. The three of them were standing close together, making it impossible for the Spartan to go undetected.

He considered the three men in front of him. Two of them were Elite soldiers; their gold armor shone in the light. Each was armed with a plasma rifle. The other man, however, held no weapon and seemed terrified; even from across the room, John could see his hand trembling.

Suddenly, the Elite on the left turned around and began walking in a tight circle. John tucked himself back in the shadows and waited for him to have his back turned.

When the Elite had moved into position, John turned into a blur of motion. He ran to the soldier and slammed the butt of his gun on the back of his skull. Before the unsuspecting Elite hit the ground, John spun around and slammed his gauntlet into the other Elite's jaw as he was reaching for his weapon. The Elite staggered back several steps, but had not fallen. John rushed him and smashed his fist into his jaw, knocking him to the floor unconscious.

The man at the desk cowered in fear. "Please! Don't hurt me, I'm unarmed," he said in the Covenant dialect.

John hesitated.

Keyes and the others stepped into the room. "Hold on, Master Chief." The captain strode across the room and plucked the transmitter from the man's ear. "We wouldn't want anyone to know that we're here, would we?"

"No!" the man replied.

"He certainly doesn't seem like the typical pain in the ass Covenant we're used to," said Johnson.

"I am not a soldier. My homeland was taken over by the Covenant nearly 25 years ago. They make those of us who are good in the sciences to work for them," he spoke in broken English.

"What are you doing here?" Keyes demanded.

The man didn't answer right away. John took a step forward.

"All right, we were looking for the technology of the Ancients! We believe there is a database here in the archives." He looked at Cortana. "Please, if I don't retrieve the data, they will kill my wife and daughters."

"No they won't. Your bodyguards didn't do their job," Keyes replied. Then he nodded to John.

John hit him on the head and the man slumped to the floor.

"We'll finish setting up the charges and find another way back to the command post," Keyes said.

Cortana spoke up. "Sir, if there is Forerunner technology here, I should attempt to recover it before it gets destroyed."

Keyes frowned. "My orders are clear, Cortana. So are yours. We are to blow the hell out of this place, making sure that the Covenant don't have any reason to come back here."

"I only need fifteen minutes, sir. If some Covenant scientist can hack into the database then so can I," Cortana retorted.

John stood in between them as they faced off.

The fact they were still outnumbered weighed on his mind. Insuring their safety while completing their mission was going to be difficult to do without the added objective of Cortana decrypting the Forerunner data. Halsey and her uncharacteristic request flittered through his mind.

He opened his private comm channel to the AI. "Cortana, we shouldn't stay. The captain is right. We need to finish the mission."

Her lips pressed together, the only outward sign that she had heard him.

"_Yes we should. What we shouldn't do is destroy any Forerunner data_."

John was accustomed to Cortana's stubbornness; he had come to appreciate it over time. This was something different. She had never argued a direct order from High Command before.

"There will be others."

"Sir," Cortana said, ignoring John. "I can download the contents of the files while the Chief and Johnson set up the charges."

When Keyes swore under his breath, John knew Cortana had gotten her way. "You've got ten minutes." She flashed John a smug look before sitting in front of the computer.

"Chief, Johnson...you know what you need to do." Keyes handed Johnson the sack with the explosive charges on it. "It's up to you two to find an escape route."

"Understood, sir."

The two men left Keyes and Cortana behind, despite John's unspoken concerns. He knew the captain was a skilled soldier; he and Cortana would be prepared if something went wrong.

He and Johnson moved stealthy through the ancient library. Methodically, they avoided the Covenant patrols and planted the explosives throughout the building. When Johnson set down the final charge, John glanced at the timer of his HUD: Cortana and Keyes had

less than a minute before they should be leaving the basement area.

Tense, he straightened as he waited for Cortana to contact him. He was tempted to reach across their link himself and "see" through Cortana's perspective, but decided against it. He knew her migraines were still a threat and wouldn't risk doing anything that would jeopardize her well-being.

Less than a minute later, he was contacted not by Cortana, but by Captain Keyes. "Chief, you and Johnson need to get to our position. Now."

The fact that the captain was speaking to him meant one thing: Cortana was in trouble.

His promise to Doctor Halsey replayed in his mind. He nodded in the direction of the basement. "Time to move."

"Damn," Johnson swore. "I knew this was too easy."

John nodded curtly as they retraced their steps. As they were getting to the underground wing of the library, John heard a very familiar voice carry over the air. "...you sure you want to do that? If _anything _happens to either of us, I will erase all of the data."

"How do you know that you have the data?" questioned one of the Covenant soldiers.

John led Johnson into the small passageway. It led to a large room where Cortana and Keyes were surrounded by nearly a dozen Elites. They had their weapons aimed at her; she and Keyes were standing back to back, each brandishing a pistol.

"Cortana."

"_It's about time you got here. I don't know how much longer I can hold them off_," she transmitted.

"What do you want me to do?"

"_A distraction would be nice_."

John could do that. He pulled out a frag grenade. If he lobbed it just right, he could knock out several support columns on the other side of the room, causing enough of a distraction to allow Cortana and Keyes to escape.

He pulled out the pin and hurled it across the room. Seconds later, the explosion shook the ground and the Covenant soldiers turned from their prisoners.

John took advantage of their confusion and took aim at one of the the Elites while Johnson fired at another. Just as John hit his target, Cortana shot the soldier standing in front of her as Keyes did the same. A smattering of shots hit his armor; his shields lowered dangerously.

When he tucked behind a large bookcase, he saw Cortana and Keyes run

in the direction of the passage. John gave them covering fire as they made it safely inside. Johnson was close behind them. Once John was convinced the other three had enough of a head start, he pulled out his only plasma grenade and threw it in the midst of the surviving Elites.

John activated the remote timer for the explosives, not wanting any of the Covenant forces to escape.

They had five minutes to get out of the building.

The four of them ran down the corridor to the library's main structure. They stayed in the shadows, knowing that the Covenant wouldn't stop chasing them.

They ran through another wing and Cortana nodded to a plain door. "It's a fire access hallway. Should keep us out of the Covenant's view."

Should be. John would have liked something a bit but reassuring, but they are few options.

She turned the knob but it didn't move. John stepped beside her and kicked in the door.

3:46

It was pitch black.

He turned on the flashlight on his helmet and took point. A steep set of stairs was in front of them. Without wasting a moment, John climbed the stairs, three at a time.

When they got to the top of the stairs, there was another door waiting for them.

2:51

The door opened to a large room full of ancient books and parchments. There would be time to mourn the loss of human history, but not until after they weren't being chased by the Covenant.

They were halfway across the enormous room when a bolt of plasma sailed over his head.

"Where's that luck of yours?" Cortana grumbled.

"Go," John said. "I'll take care of him."

The three of them exchange a look with each other. Keyes nodded slowly. "Let's go."

John stopped running and scanned the room. For seven precious seconds, he couldn't see anyone in the room. Then, as he leaned to the left, he saw the light bend in an unnatural way.

There.

He grabbed his pistol and barely lined up the shot before firing twice. Each bullet hits its target and the Elite crumbled to the

ground.

1:16

The rest of his team had made it out of the main reading room. He sprinted to the end of the room and turned the corner. Johnson and the others were approaching a group of ODSs at the end of the hall.

When he caught up to the others, the group of UNSC soldiers ran through an emergency exit to the outside.

0:32

The building was surrounded by Bumblebees, Scorpions and Pelicans, all ready to take out any Covenant that tried to escape. In the distance, John saw a very familiar four-person team: his former Blue team.

0:00

The ground shook as the explosions detonated. The building spewed dust and debris as it shuddered at the impact.

Keyes looked at Cortana with a slight frown. "Was it worth it?"

"I think we both know the answer to that, sir."

"Is this seat taken?"

It wasn't often that Cortana emerged from her lab to the mess hall but with everything that happened since their return to Reach, she wanted to avoid the ONI building. And Halsey in particular.

The doctor has been livid when she had found out that Cortana had put up a fight to collect the Forerunner data. "You were reckless. You could have gotten yourself killed. If you had just wiped the mainframe when you found it, you and Jacob would have never been in that situation," she had seethed. "Your actions not only endangered you, but affected others."

A wave of guilt had washed over Cortana. Captain Keyes had received an official reprimand for defying a direct order from High Command.

"I know," she had said quietly.

"And now, my hands are tied." Halsey had gestured to the tablet on her desk. "High Command is forcing me to upload this protocol into your system."

Cortana had been aware of the command. The protocol -GOLD MINE-was designed to override any of her subroutines if she was in the middle of completing a direct command from High Command. Everything, including her alpha-priority commands, would be subjugated by the protocol if it was activated.

"High Command sees you as their tool, Cortana. There are some of us who feel otherwise," the doctor had said pointedly.

That time the shame had become too overwhelming. Cortana had excused herself while Halsey worked on the final programming for the protocol and escaped from the ONI building.

John looked up from the empty table and shook his head. He didn't seem surprised to see her there.

Cortana sat down in front of him with a cup of coffee in her hands. "I never got a chance to say thank you for saving my life. Again."

It could have been the lighting in the room, but she swore she saw a faint blush color his cheek. "I was following orders."

It didn't sound as noble - or as significant- when he put it that way.

She swallowed a swig of coffee. "You were right," she forced out.

This time, John was surprised. His eyebrows rose at her statement.

"I shouldn't have pushed the issue with the database. Based on the preliminary analysis, it doesn't look like there is anything significant on it." She looked away. "Captain Keyes got a reprimand because of his actions," she confessed.

John picked up an orange segment and ate it before replying. "I know. I was in the waiting room when he came out of his debriefing. He told me to watch my ass."

"Did you..." she trailed off as she accessed his CSV. Surely Catherine would have told her had John been punished for his involvement.

"No," he said as she accessed the debriefing notes.

"They are adding a new protocol to my programming," she admitted. "I'm becoming too much of a free thinker."

John's brow furrowed. "What does this protocol do?"

She shook off his question. "It's nothing. In fact," she smiled a little too brightly, "you'll probably enjoy the 'improvement'."

"I like your programming just the way it is."

It was the most overt compliment that John had ever given her. Despite the mirth it produced, it was overshadowed by the guilt that she was dealing with. "I don't. I didn't fully analyze about the welfare of the team. Captain Keyes would have gotten killed when he was protecting me when I was in the system. You and Johnson risked your lives coming back for us. If I had-"

"Cortana," John interrupted. "Don't."

"It's alright, John. What Catherine told me was the truth." She lifted her head and jutted her jaw forward. "I'm sorry." She drew in a long breath. "I won't put any of you in that position again. The

risks I take will be my own." She reached across the table and gave his hand a brief squeeze. "I promise."

John just looked at her.

She didn't take offense at his silence. She knew she had thrown a lot of emotional issues at him during their brief conversation. Cortana stood up. "I should go find the captain and apologize."

As she began to turn around, John called her name. She looked at him questioningly.

"I overheard him say he was going back to the _Autumn_," he said awkwardly.

They both knew that wasn't what he was going to say, but Cortana was content to let the issue go. She had more pressing things to deal with, though her subroutines were already trying to determine what John was going to say.

15. Pushing the Boundaries: Part 1

****Updated (3/12): Author Notes: I rewrote the beginning of this section. There is a reference to a character in "The Fall of Reach", but you don't need to read it to understand who she is. :D**

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* * *

><p>1025 Hours, August 30, 2552 (Military Calendar)
>North America, Reach UNSC Military Complex,
Omega Wing-Section
Three secure facility**

"Should I repeat my analysis?"

Cortana looked at the inquisitive expression on Deja's face. The holographic AI had been working with her to assimilate the data she had collected in New York for the past two hours. Truthfully, she hadn't heard anything Deja had said, but a quick download of her findings allowed Cortana to collect the data she had missed.

"That won't be necessary."

Deja considered her for a moment. "It seems as though you are distracted. Perhaps it would be better if we continued our research at another time."

Cortana pressed her lips together at the AI's observation. She had been distracted. There was something different in the way John spoke to her when she had seen him in the mess hall two days ago. Cortana had taken it upon herself to figure out what, exactly, was so different, but she couldn't pinpoint anything directly.

And it was driving her crazy.

She was grateful when Doctor Halsey finally released the data to her earlier in the day. ONI wanted Cortana to convert the data from the Forerunner code to the UNSC's binary code. It would take her the

better part of eight hours, but it at least kept her mind off John.

Sort of.

"Now is fine," Cortana assured her. She moved to stand by the holographic chalkboard, scanning over the data that scrolled on it.

The hologram nodded. Dutifully, Deja began to start rudimentary translations while Cortana focused on the larger data clusters. There was something calming about working with another AI, Cortana noted. They were able to work in tandem with only an occasional command shared between them.

Nearly ten minutes passed before the AIs were interrupted by the sound of the doors to her lab sliding apart.

John.

He stepped inside the room, looking at Cortana and Deja. "Did you find anything?"

"Perhaps," Cortana replied, wondering why he was here.

She stopped herself. She was not going to analyze his actions!

She turned to Deja. "Would you please deliver the data we have reviewed to Doctor Halsey?"

The hologram's frowned. "But we are not finished-" Deja stopped mid-sentence as awareness of Cortana's intention were realized. She glanced at John briefly. "When you are ready to continue, please inform me." Then she blinked out of sight.

John stood in the center of the room, looking out of place. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

She waved off his apology. "It's fine. I was getting tired of having a babysitter."

His brows furrowed. "A babysitter?"

"Doctor Halsey said that she was sending Deja to help, but I know she was here to keep an eye on me. Doctor Halsey is concerned that I'll push myself too hard." She sighed. "She doesn't think I know my own limits."

John got a curious look on his face. "She's worried about you."

There was something in his voice, a plea of understanding, that caused Cortana's frustration to ebb away. She knew that Halsey had always had her best interest in mind. She only wished that the doctor would see that she didn't need to be protected, that she could take care of herself.

"I know that."

Had the doctor sent John down to her lab to make sure Cortana wasn't

working too hard? Suddenly, the mirth she had felt when she saw John on the other side of the doors soured. She didn't intend on letting her curiosity get the best of her, but when he didn't say anything for several seconds she asked, "Why are you here, John?"

"Do you want me to leave?"

She was taken aback by his lack of an answer. Her suspicion grew. The only person who he would protect from Cortana would be Halsey. "No, but I'd like to know if you came here on your own accord or if Catherine sent you."

He stiffened almost immediately. He didn't meet her gaze. "No, Doctor Halsey didn't ask me to come." He lifted his eyes to her. There was an unusual mixture of awkwardness and hurt in them. "I should go."

He wasn't going anywhere! Cortana reached her hand out and grabbed his forearm before he could turn to walk away. "John."

The look in his eyes caught her off-guard. During their missions, she had seen the powerful emotions in his eyes when he had an objective to complete. That same intensity was now directed at her.

Almost immediately her alpha priority directive screamed at her. Personal relationships were not a realistic part of her -or his- lifestyle. Their primary focus should be on the war with the Covenant, not each other. Neither of them need the complication of a relationship.

She could see the internal struggle on John's face and almost feel the emotions he was holding back. Like him, there was a conflict in Cortana's mind. Part of her wanted to ignore the logicalness of the situation and give into the temptation of pushing the boundaries.

But, if he was repressing his emotions, then so would she. It was evident that he wasn't ready for their relationship to evolve any further.

Cortana released her hold of his arm and took a step back. "I should get back to the data analysis," she said awkwardly.

He nodded wordlessly.

She didn't know whether to be relieved or feel let down. Cortana forced herself to focus on the file Catherine had sent over. Several seconds passed. John hadn't moved and seemed unperturbed that the data on the board was streaming faster than he could read. Or the fact it was written in binary code.

Finally, when she couldn't take more of his unusual behavior, she spun around to face him. "John-"

But she wasn't able to finish her sentence because the next thing she knew, John was kissing her.

0-=0-=0-=0-=0-=0-=0-=0-=

John hadn't expected for this to happen.

He was no fool. He had known that since Panama things between them were different. Cortana wasn't only the person who had been assigned to work with him; John had an emotional investment in her.

Denial had only worked for so long, until her conversation with him in the mess hall. He had never seen her so unsure of herself before. She seemed more human in that moment than any other. There was a part of him that wanted to comfort Cortana when she had been sitting across the table from him.

And that's when he knew that his feelings for her were becoming impossible to ignore.

He needed, for their sakes, to control his emotions concerning Cortana. They had a war to win and countless battles to fight. Anything, including his own life, was expendable when it came to the war against the Covenant.

Except Cortana.

For two days, he did his best to avoid interacting with her, forcing himself to move back into emotionally neutral territory. He had close relationships with his Spartan counterparts, but none of them took precedence over his duties as a soldier. Neither would Cortana, he had told himself.

When he finally felt like he had his feelings under control, he had wanted to test his resolve. He had sought out where Cortana was, determined to prove to himself that his emotions were manageable.

And he had almost succeeded.

But when Cortana had reached for him, her warmth seeped through his uniform and spread throughout his body. There was a deep longing that surged through him; it wasn't something he wanted to deal with. Gratitude flooded out of him when she had seemed to recognize his struggle and released him.

He should have walked out of the lab immediately. He didn't and he was now paying the price for his inaction.

Though, at this moment, he would have been hard pressed to complain.

He brought his hands up and tangled them in her hair, pulling her close. Cortana ran her hands up his chest then moved up to frame his face. She tasted like coffee, he noted as she deepened the kiss.

Suddenly, the soft hum, John associated with Cortana became a loud roar as the intensity of her feelings came crashing into him. It was a heady swirl of emotions, extreme and unchecked.

Moments later, they pulled apart, breathing heavily. Her blue eyes opened and studied his brown ones. She was watching him closely. "You know," she said with a slight grin, "you _almost _seem happy."

The side of his mouth lifted up. "Maybe I am," he rumbled.

Then, unexpectedly, she pushed away from him, her eyes wide in shock.

He nearly stumbled backwards at the impact, his mind reeling. Doubt entered his mind. Maybe they had crossed a line that shouldn't have been crossed.

"I'm sorry. I-"

There was fear in her eyes. "It's not you, John. It's Reach. We're under attack."

She looked off in the distance as she often did when she was accessing massive amounts of data. "I don't know how they did it, but somehow those bastards broke through the defense grid."

John watched as she walked to her computer and tapped in several command codes. As he watched her, the communiqué from Lord Hood came through on his private comm, ordering Spartans to the ONI Sword Base.

She looked up at him, her face stricken. "I can't locate Doctor Halsey," she said, panic entering into her voice.

"She has to be on base somewhere," John replied, trying to remain calm. Inwardly, he was raging. The Covenant had seized and conquered so many of the UNSC settlements over the past two decades. Taking Reach was almost too much to comprehend.

He looked at Cortana. Her jaw was set, determined. She had a score to settle with the Covenant too, he knew. She would never recover fully from the attack at Panama.

"You're right," she said, nodding her head slowly. "She'd lock down her lab at the first signs of an attack."

"We need weapons," he replied. They couldn't walk around the infiltrated base unarmed.

"I've got that covered." She reached in her desk and pulled out two pistols. She held out one to him. "It has to do for now."

Her hair was still tousled from their earlier encounter, John noticed. As he reached for the gun with his right hand, his left straightened her hair.

"Things aren't going to be awkward between us, are they?" she asked, biting her still-swollen lips.

"No," John promised. Though conflict about their actions swirled in his mind, he would not allow what might have happened come between the two of them. "We'll talk later."

She nodded once before she led them out of her lab. "The comm grid is down. I can't access the mainframe either. But from what I can tell, the Covenant are everywhere."

His eyebrows furrowed. "You're not coming to Sword Base?"

She shook her head. "I'm going to Halsey's lab so I can help her lock down any unsecured systems before the Covenant find them," Cortana said. He watched as she frowned. "I need to find her, John."

John hesitated for a second before nodding. He hated the idea of him and Cortana being separated during the attack, but he knew she would be able to take care of herself. "Meet back at the rendezvous point."

Cortana stepped close to him and pressed her lips against his own. "Be careful, John," she whispered.

"You too," he replied as he watched her walk away.

As he made his way topside, a scene from hell greeted him. Smoke was coming from several of the main buildings. Hundreds of Grunts were storming the base as the soldiers tried, in vain, to hold their ground. John wished he was wearing his armor as a plasma grenade arched over his head. He was losing valuable time having to make his way slowly to the rendezvous point.

He pressed himself against the wall as an Elite turned the corner.

When the soldier moved closer to him, he didn't hesitate.

He fired in the back of his skull and watched as the Covenant soldier fell to the ground. He grabbed the Elite's weapons—a plasma pistol and the three grenades on his belt—then continued making his way to bunker across base.

An explosion came from the west, near the ONI labs. He refused to think about Cortana.

She would be fine.

He stepped out of the shadows and started making his way towards the bunker. Suddenly, from behind him, the roar of a Jeep's engine sounded. He whipped around, his plasma pistol aimed at the driver of the car.

"It's me, Chief!" Johnson shouted. "Now get in the damn Jeep."

John climbed inside the car. Before he could fully sit down, Johnson floored it. "Communication grid is down. Last thing I heard was from Keyes, ordering me to the Autumn."

"I need to get to security bunker Delta," John replied.

"Yeah, the captain told me," Johnson said quietly. "They want to try some kind of offense, but, look around, Chief, it's already too late."

John didn't want to do as the sergeant had told him, but did anyway. Smoke plumed from dozens of buildings, ruthless Elites were marching in and assassinating any soldier that run out of bullets or luck. "How did this happen?"

"Hell if I know. I was in the barracks, trying to get the damn paperwork filed on time for once when I heard an explosion from the

docking stations," Johnson frowned.

The rest of the ride was silent as they mourned and raged at the carnage taking place. Johnson took the last turn sharply and stopped in front of the main security door.

"Good luck, Chief."

"You too, Johnson."

John pushed forward and sprinted for the security entrance as a half dozen Elites passed by, shooting any soldiers that were unlucky enough to be in the way of their plasma pistols. Quickly, after a retinal scan, he was allowed entrance into the room.

Inside, all of the Spartans, with the exclusion of the Noble Team, and Lord Hood were waiting for him.

"John!" Kelly said, relieved. "We didn't think you were going to make it."

"What are you talking about?" He hated being out of the loop, especially in combat situations. Whatever happened, it was significant. The Spartans didn't get spooked without reason.

Several of the Spartans exchanged glances with each other. "He doesn't know," Kelly muttered to Fred.

John tensed. He turned to Lord Hood who was looking at him regretfully.

"Master Chief, at 1030 hours Doctor Halsey issued a UNSC-wide message." He drew in a long breath. "As of today, she has deflected to the Covenant," Lord Hood explained.

John felt like he got suckered punch. Doctor Halsey, the woman he considered to be like a surrogate mother, the one who had taught him and the other Spartans to keep their fight against the Covenant, had turned against the UNSC?

"And," he paused as he looked directly in John's eyes, "there are implications that Cortana might be involved as well." He leaned over the desk. "Where is she, Chief? Where is Cortana?"

John swallowed thickly as he thought of her earlier panic when she was unable to find the doctor.

He closed his eyes briefly. "She's looking for Halsey."

16. Pushing the Boundaries: Part 2

****Updated (3/12): Author Notes: No major edits for this section.**

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><p>Cortana turned the corner, aiming at the Grunt that had the misfortune of being in her way. With a quick shot to his skull,

Cortana took care of the Covenant threat. The area was relatively empty. A random Grunt would show up every once in a while, but so far Cortana hadn't encountered any Elites.<p>

John's luck must have rubbed off on her.

She made her way to the end of the hallway and accessed the security elevator. She stood to the side, ready to attack any Covenant that were waiting on the other side of the doors.

Fortunately, when the doors slid apart, three Spartans were on the other side.

She recognized Carter and Emile and assumed the other Spartan standing to the side was Thom's replacement, Noble Six. But when she went to pull up the data on the new member of the Noble Team, she was locked out of the UNSC system.

What was going on?

Carter took a step forward and pulled the gun out of her hand.

"What the hell is going on here?" Cortana demanded.

"We're here to escort you off the base for questioning concerning the treason of Catherine Halsey," Carter said, his voice cold.

She must have misheard Carter. Halsey committing treason against the UNSC? That was impossible.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Admitting ignorance was difficult for Cortana.

Carter gripped her bicep roughly and walked her onto the elevator. "Sure you don't. You are coming with us."

As the elevator doors slid shut, Cortana desperately tried to access any of the UNSC's databases, but found herself completely locked out of the system. Whoever was in charge of data encryption knew what they were doing.

She glanced at Carter and frowned. Kat was probably behind the security measures.

Not to be deterred, she kept pursuing through the encryption codes until she found a crack in the code.

It was a low priority system-temperature control in the mess hall-but it would be enough for her to get in. She quickly wormed her way through the system until she finally found the data she was looking for.

The elevator doors opening distracted her slightly. "Where are you taking me?"

None of them responded.

As they walked in the underground bunker, she pulled up the file and saw Halsey sitting at her desk, looking calm and poised as usual.

"This is Doctor Catherine Halsey, authorization number Omega516Alpha29. I am recording this message to resign from my post in the UNSC and ONI effective immediately." She pushed slightly back from her desk. "The data given to me by CTN 0452-9 has revealed to me the futile effort we are attempting to make against the Covenant. It is clear to me now what needs to be done. Do not bother looking coming after me. By the time you are watching this, I will be well-protected by Covenant forces."

The video ended.

Cortana was reeling. Halsey had turned against the UNSC? Worse, she had implicated that Cortana was somehow involved in her decision to deflect to the Covenant.

What would John think?

She closed her eyes as she replayed her earlier conversation with him. Her first concern had been Halsey. That combined with the doctor's words would make him question her loyalty to the UNSC. In his mind, she was not to be trusted.

She tried opening a comm channel to him, but was unsuccessful. Inwardly she cursed and she was roughly put in the back seat of the Jeep as Emile gunned it. They raced across the base. She watched in horror as smoke bellowed from various buildings on Reach. Corpses littered the ground, both UNSC forces and Covenant.

It was a massacre.

It took them twice as long to reach the hangar bays as they had to circumvent the damage done by the Covenant. Finally, they stopped in front of a familiar ship.

The Pillar of Autumn.

Keyes stood at the entrance bay, his face wan, his body tense.

Noble Six reached over, pulled Cortana out of the vehicle and brought her to Keyes.

"You too, sir?" she accused.

He flinched slightly. "My hands are tied, Cortana. The Autumn is going to escort you off base where you will be held in a classified location for questioning concerning your involvement in Halsey's treason."

"I am not involved," she said, her eyes flashing.

"I'm sorry," he said softly. He took her from the Spartan and nodded. "Transfer complete. Now go give 'em hell, Spartans."

"Yes, sir," they replied.

Cortana allowed herself to be led to a seldom used conference room. She took a seat as Keyes stood at the door frame, pulling out his pipe. "As captain of the Autumn, I must inform you that you are being detained by ONI until you have been questioned and cleared of

all wrong doing. Any attempt to escape will be seen as an act of treason."

His voice softened slightly. "As your friend, I would suggest that you go along with their questions. The sooner they clear you, the sooner you can get out there to fight these bastards."

She felt her anger deflate. It seemed at least for now she had one ally. "I understand, sir."

"Good luck, Cortana."

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Several hours later, the door opened. Cortana had been in isolation since Keyes had locked her in the room. She had tried to keep apprised of the situation beyond the four walls, but the techs at ONI had been successful in keeping her out of the mainframe.

She turned towards her visitor.

It was John, wearing his MJOLNIR armor. His face was covered by his gold visor, but Cortana could tell that, despite his earlier assurance, things between them were most definitely going to be awkward between the two of them.

"How long has Halsey been planning this?" he asked without preamble. His voice is as firm as steel.

She amended her earlier observation; this wasn't John standing in front of her.

This was Spartan-117.

Despite the fact that she was expecting for him to be suspicious of her, Cortana was livid. Cortana's eyes narrowed and her blood raced through her veins. "You think I'm a traitor? That I knew what she was going to do?" she sputtered.

"I think she implicated you in her message."

He was serious in his accusation. He was not going to back down.

Cortana immediately shifted gears. He wasn't her almost lover, her friend or her partner. He was her prosecutor.

"Whatever plan she had is her own. I knew nothing about her defection," Cortana argued. "You know me better than that."

John leaned over the table before slamming his fists down. The thump echoed throughout the room.

Cortana, however, would not be intimidated.

He was emotional.

Too emotional.

Cortana had no doubt that their earlier actions had thrown off his

normally controlled feelings. Then, the treason by Halsey and the attack on Reach was taking him close to his breaking point.

"Twenty-nine Spartans are dead, thousands of soldiers were killed." He lowered his voice. "What's your role in this?"

"My role, Chief, is to defeat the Covenant. The same as yours." She looked up at his visor, seeing her warped, defensive posture staring back at her. She hated seeing herself like that. "If you are going to accuse me of treason, the least you can do is look me in the face, not hide behind your helmet."

For a moment, he didn't move. Then, he reached around and released the locks on his helmet. Cortana forced herself not to react to the blood that was splattered on his face or the bruise that had nearly swollen his eye shut. He looked at her, cold and aloof.

"When did Doctor Halsey first contact the Covenant?"

Cortana was enraged. How could he look her in the eye and believe that she knew anything about Halsey?

She leaned across the table, inches from his face. "I. Don't. Know. Maybe she told you. You are her favorite," she hissed before sitting back in her chair. "I did nothing wrong. I was with you when the attack started, remember?"

For a moment, John seemed to soften slightly.

"John--"

She had pushed too fast, too soon. He stiffened. "What we did..." he started. He shook his head. "I should have never--"

Cortana was not going to let him finish his sentence. "What? Allowed yourself to feel? To care about me?" She sat forward. "You're human."

"I'm a Spartan." He straightened up. "I allowed myself to lose focus on my objectives."

"You couldn't have known what Halsey was going to do. No one did."

For a second, she wondered if he was going to accuse her of working with the doctor, but it seemed like, for the moment, he had moved past the accusations.

"I should have never allowed my personal feelings to distract me from the war against the Covenant. It's a mistake I won't make again." He turned around and walked to the door. "Ackerson is on his way to finish the questioning. When we get to the secure base, High Command has given orders for your shard to be removed from my neural lace."

Cortana's eyes widened. "You can't do that. I'll die."

John hesitated by the door. "If they can't figure out a way to remove it without killing you then Lord Hood has already ordered for it to

remain." He paused. "We need you alive to find Halsey," he said before closing the door.

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Three days later, Cortana was redeemed.

Her character had been investigated, her loyalty doubted. Questions about her allegiance to the UNSC and accusations about her conduct were hurled at her by Ackerson and his men. Her core processing code had been thoroughly examined line by line by the ONI officers.

Yes, she understood the UNSC's need to make sure that she wasn't affiliated to Halsey's plans to join the Covenant. What she couldn't get past was the hurls of charges thrown by people-Ackerson, especially-over the past 72 hours. It was as if all the missions she had been a part of suddenly had a question mark over their validity.

She had seen John once since they arrived on the secure base in Mexico City, when the techs attempted-and failed- to remove the chip from his neural lace. He had been cold, distant. He believed the doctor's prerecorded message rather than the words coming from Cortana.

In that moment, she hated Halsey.

Cortana knew how much he respected and trusted the doctor. It would be impossible for her to convince John that she had no idea what the doctor was planning.

No, she thought bitterly, he would have to come to that conclusion himself.

The door opened from behind her, pulling her from her thoughts. She crossed her legs as Lord Hood took a seat in front of her. "Have I passed all of your tests? Answered all of the questions to your satisfaction?" Her voice was harsh.

At least he had the decency to look contrite, Cortana thought.

"We had to be sure, Cortana. Despite what Ackerson may think, Halsey was by far the brightest mind in ONI. If there was anyone who could infiltrate an AI, it would be her," the admiral said. "There are some who still don't think you are to be trustedâ€|" An image of a six and a half foot Spartan sprung in her mind. "But I am confident that you are not a plant of Halsey's."

Gaining the confidence of Hood was significant, Cortana knew. He was the most respected admiral in the fleet. If he trusted her, then others would soon follow.

He leaned back in his chair. "I'm reassigning you to Alpha Team."

Cortana raised her eyebrows. "But John - the Master Chief is on that team. I don't think I have his vote of confidence yet," she replied dryly.

He straightened his shoulders. "The Master Chief is a consummate

soldier. He will follow the orders given to him." He sighed. "I'm not going to say it's going to be easy for you, Cortana, but we need you on Alpha Team. Now more than ever. We need to find those databases before the Covenant do."

She nodded. "Understood, sir."

He stood up and held out his hand for her to shake. As she gripped it, he said, "Good luck. God knows we need it after Reach."

17. Full Circle: Part 1

****Updated (3/12): Author Notes: No major edits. :D****

* * *

><p>1645 Hours, October 21, 2552 (Military Calendar)
>South America, Brazilian Rainforest

It was too damn hot, Cortana thought as she pulled her hair back in a ponytail.

Not that she, or any of the rest of the men in the group, had any say in it. They were there to find another artifact and nothing, including the oppressing heat and humidity that surrounded them, would stop them from completing their mission.

It was high noon and the sun was beating its relentless rays on the campsite. She turned the solar-powered fan towards the laptop in front of her, attempting to keep it cool from the intense heat. Sweat trickled down her temple as she shifted her chair, turning away as best she could from the sun. As the data trickled into her matrix from the M12 Force Application Vehicle, an earth-burrowing machine with two large "tusks" which had earned itself the nickname Warthog, Cortana had to wonder what in the world possessed the humans to use the Brazilian rainforest of all places to hide their technology nearly five hundred years ago.

It had been four days since they made camp -much too long to be considered safe- but Keyes had been insistent: they were not leaving until they found something. _The Pillar of Autumn_ and the rest of the crew were safely hidden deep in the Andres, away from any Covenant in the area, while the four-man team led by Captain Jacob Keyes worked around the clock to discover the location of the Forerunner Artifact before the Covenant did.

Cortana had worked nearly non-stop since they arrived while the men cycled through scout duty. Once she located the artifact-failure wasn't an option-they would proceed below the surface and extract the desperately needed data.

Silently, Cortana watched the video feed on the tiny computer as her matrix chip communicated directly with the Warthog. The atmospheric conditions were similar to the underground ruins where they had found other artifacts at previous dig sites which was a promising sign. She issued a burst of new commands to the Warthog as she heard unmistakable footsteps approaching from behind her position.

Part of her wondered why he was even bothering coming to her; if she

found something, he would be the first person to know. No, she knew he was here to try to provoke her into producing the results faster which was a pointless endeavor. She was working as fast as she could.

She drew a deep breath, preparing herself for the confrontation. "Chief," she greeted, not looking away from the screen. She could see his reflection in the laptop monitor. He pulled off his sunglasses and looked pointedly at her, ignoring her greeting.

"Did you find anything yet?" he asked stiffly.

The Master Chief leaned forward, putting his hand on the desk next to the laptop. Cortana fought the urge to turn the screen away as his dirt-smeared bicep came into view. But, she wouldn't be petty; she wouldn't give him a taste of his own medicine. She turned slightly to face him before answering him. He had folded his camo bandanna over itself and tied it around his head, catching the beads of sweat that threatened to roll down his face. The humidity caused his olive green t-shirt to cling to his body. His duel holster was taut against his sides. He looked every part the Spartan that he was.

"Not yet, though we do have some encouraging data coming in," she replied, avoiding the piercing glare he was giving her. "Like the other sites, we've got plenty of dead bodies and no signs of radiation. But I haven't found the database yet."

Cortana knew he wouldn't be happy with the news. They needed to find something soon. After the takeover on Reach and the subsequent loss of the eastern seaboard of the North America, hope in the UNSC was starting to fade. They still held the majorities of the Americas and parts of Africa, but they were making no headway on reclaiming Covenant-occupied land.

He pressed his lips together as he scanned the trees around them, most likely looking for Elites hiding in the branches. "How much longer?"

"I don't know, Chief."

He looked at her suspiciously, as if he suspected she was keeping something from him and the others. It was a look that Cortana had become accustomed to seeing from him since her reassignment to the Alpha Team.

"If you have something to say, Chief, now would be the time to say it," she blurted out. How long was he going to hold onto the past?

"Just tell me when you've found something," he said gruffly, standing up straight. He nodded to Johnson who was leaning against a tree nearby before walking away.

"He still doesn't trust me," she commented offhandedly, glancing at her friend.

Johnson set down the combat knife he had been cleaning on the desk and looked at Cortana. "It's going to take some time for him to come around," he said with a sigh.

She laughed bitterly and shook her head, causing the ponytail to swish back and forth. "You've been saying that for weeks now and it's not getting any better."

"Now, wait a minute, he's been talking to you, hasn't he? That is a hell of a lot better than the way he had been avoiding you," Johnson replied as he looked at the Chief making his way to the center of camp. "Reach is still too fresh in his mind."

Cortana rolled her eyes. "All of us suffered losses there, Johnson, and I don't get the impression from anyone else in the UNSC that I am not to be trusted."

He reached inside his vest pocket and held out a cigar for Cortana. She shook her head, declining the offer. "But you know that he was Halsey's favorite," the sergeant countered. "Her deflection to the Covenant..." He shook his head. "It's damn near impossible for anyone of us to believe what she did. So you can sure as hell believe it's going to be hardest on him. And it doesn't help that every time he looks at you, he sees her."

She had heard the same argument from him before and it still riled her up, just like it had every time he defended the Chief. "I can't help that my core processing comes from Halsey's cloned brain any more than you could change your genetic heritage," Cortana shot back.

"You know what I'm talking about. You look like you could have been Halsey's twin if she was about thirty years younger," Johnson said, slipping the cigar into his mouth.

And that was the crux of it all, Cortana thought with a wave of frustration. She would never be seen for who she was, but only for what her origins were.

When she had first been activated, still limited in a holographic avatar on the Reach base, she had been given the choice of what she would want her body to look like. She remembered how, after accessing the DNA profile of Catherine Halsey, her creator, she chose to mimic the doctor's genetic makeup. There were differences between the two of them; perfect cloning was still several years away, but there was no mistaking she was a Halsey.

That decision would haunt Cortana for the rest of her life.

"It's not my fault she betrayed us."

"I know that," he said sincerely. "So does Lord Hood or else you'd never be on the Alpha team. And, hell, deep down, the Chief does too, but," he said, gently placing a hand on her shoulder, "he's as stubborn as you are. So for right now you're S.O.L."

Cortana turned back to the computer, frowning. "Thanks for the pep talk, Johnson. You sure know how to brighten a girl's day," she replied dryly.

He grinned. "Just call me your personal ray of sunshine."

Cortana suppressed a sigh. She knew Johnson was right; John wasn't going to change any time soon.

Maybe it was time to move on.

Maybe there would be no reconciliation between her and John.

Maybe it was really over.

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John scanned the tall trees around them, looking for any unusual movement in the branches. The sun was beginning to go down which would make it nearly impossible to detect any Covenant forces, even with his genetically enhanced vision. So far, they had managed to avoid being found by the Elites, but John knew it was only a matter of time before their luck would run out and they would be discovered. Cortana needed to find something soon, he thought with a grimace.

As he turned to face camp, he saw Johnson standing next to his tent with an uncharacteristic frown on his face. "She's been pretty upset today, you know."

The Chief knew exactly who he was talking about; there had only been one woman he had been concerned with since the fall of Reach. "If she's too uncomfortable, then she could always request reassignment," John said evenly. He walked forward, not wanting to continue the conversation.

"She did. While you were on patrol earlier."

That caused John to stop and turn around to look at his friend. He wondered if Johnson was testing him, to try to get a reaction from him, but as he took in his grim look, he realized that Johnson was serious. "But, what about the link?" he asked, his hand subconsciously moving to the back of his neck and rubbing the neural interface.

Johnson shrugged. "She seemed pretty confident that she could find another compatible Spartan on the Beta team. Kelly, I think."

No, John thought as he turned towards Cortana who was too busy working several dozen yards away to hear their conversation, she wouldn't leave the Alpha team. "She's not serious about transferring," he declared. Though he still struggled with trusting the AI, he knew she was not a quitter.

Johnson lit his cigar. "Tell that to Keyes. When he found out, I thought he was gonna explode right then and there. Practically begged her to reconsider," Johnson replied.

"Did she?" he asked. He tried to come off nonchalant, but sensed an edge to his voice that was normally not there.

"Don't know. She hasn't said anything to me about it. She's probably seeing if you're going to continue being an ass to her or not. Hell, if it was me, I would have put in the request weeks ago," he replied, lighting a cigar.

John watched Cortana for a few seconds, still sitting in the same chair he had seen her in earlier in the day, staring at the computer screen. "You're not her," he muttered.

His friend looked at him for a few seconds before finally saying, "No, I'm not. And _she_'s not Halsey."

John flinched slightly. Hearing the doctor's name sent adrenaline coursing through his veins. Most people wouldn't have dared to bring up her name around him, but, as John knew, Johnson wasn't like most people.

"I know she's not," he gritted out.

"Then act like it," Johnson demanded. "Alpha Team needs the two of you on the same page so the sooner you accept that Cortana is not a threat to any of us, the better." He took a long drag from his cigar. "The two of you were one hell of a team and I can't wait until you two start working together again to start kicking the Covenant's asses."

18. Full Circle: Part 2

****Updated (3/12): Author Notes: No major edits for this section.**

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><p>"She's in my mind?"

_ "That's up for debate," Cortana said, studying him with a thoughtful look. "My subroutines will transfer your neural impulses and transfer them directly into motion. So, in that regard, yes, I'm in your mind." _

_ "But," Halsey injected, "she will only be able to perform those actions when you are in your armor. When you are not in it, the shard will be no more intrusive than any other part of your neural lace." _

_ John shifted his gaze to Cortana briefly before looking back at the doctor. "I feel a hum in the back of my head. Is that normal?" _

_ He didn't miss the look of surprise that passed over Cortana's face. Unlike Halsey, who had learned to keep her emotions well-hidden and in check, the same could not be said about Cortana. _

_ As he started to become concerned that something was wrong with their neural connection, Halsey shrugged off his question. "It wasn't completely unexpected. Your body is 'hearing' the connection because you are in you are in your armor. When you're not in it, Cortana's chip will be nothing more than a hum in your subconscious, like your heart rate or your breathing patterns. It might take time to adjust, but soon you won't even know she's there." _

It had been one more thing Halsey had lied about, John thought as he scrubbed his face from his restless four hours of sleep. Even though he rarely had the opportunity to wear his MJOLNIR armor, he _always_ felt Cortana's presence.

If it had ended there, John would have been able to ignore the

constant hum in the back of his mind, but as their connection strengthened, more side effects presented themselves. After several weeks, when their PSI wave patterns had synced with each other, John found that he could piggyback off the link and "see" through Cortana's eyes.

After Reach, when the techs at ONI attempted to disrupt the neural link between them, it was discovered that there would be no safe way to terminate the connection. Now, however, with Cortana's apparent resignation, it seemed as though the AI had discovered a way around their link.

For some reason, John didn't feel as relieved as he should.

"She's not Halsey."

Johnson was right, John admitted grudgingly. Despite his efforts to prove to himself, and the others at the UNSC, that she was a threat, John had found no evidence of Cortana defecting to the Covenant.

But, there had been no signs that Halsey was going to turn against the UNSC, were there?

It couldn't have been coincidence that Halsey linked the two of them together just nine months before her deflection to the Covenant, John believed. Cortana had to be some kind of plant installed from Halsey to collect sensitive UNSC information and send it to the Covenant. After the fall of Reach, Cortana had been whisked away by High Command and the ONI and run through every type of questioning imaginable. Tests had been run and rerun, assuring those in command that Cortana was no threat to the UNSC.

Three days later, she had been cleared and given her assignment on the Alpha team, much to John's chagrin. His petitions to have her retested were denied by Lord Hood himself who, in a private meeting, had told him to take a step back from the situation.

"I'm afraid, Chief, that you have become emotionally compromised."

Hearing those words felt worse than getting hit with a needler round from fifteen yards away.

He was a Spartan.

He was supposed to be impervious to any strong emotions.

And yet, in the course of nine months, Cortana had managed to infiltrate his stoic behavior and had, briefly, caused him to look away from his true goal: to defeat the Covenant.

It would never happen again.

After the meeting, he silenced his complaints and focused on his duties on Alpha team, attempting to ignore Cortana as much as possible. She might have fooled everyone else, John told himself, but he was not going to be so easily deceived.

But, as the weeks went by, he found himself reluctantly starting to

believe he might have been wrong about Cortana. They had already found two databases while the Beta team was still trying to uncover their first relic. Over the past few days, John found himself, more than once, migrating to Cortana, despite his reservations.

If Cortana really was planning on leaving Alpha team because of John's attitude, then whatever advantage they lost would be on John's shoulders.

It was time to move on, he thought with a sigh. He closed his eyes and focused on Cortana, wondering if she was asleep.

No. The hazy image came into his mind: she was still working diligently at her laptop.

He wasn't going to be able to get to sleep, John conceded. He swung his legs over the side of the too-small cot and made his way outside. Harshly, he pushed the flap to the side, allowing himself to exit the tent.

It was still too hot, he thought as the humid heat surrounded him.

As he looked across the camp and saw Cortana sitting in the moonlight, he took in her appearance. Her ponytail had been taken down, allowing her hair to hit her shoulders. Her tank shirt and khaki shorts gave the appearance of innocence, but John knew about the pistol holster she had around her ankle.

While her eyes were alert, John noticed that her body was hunched forward. He had a feeling that Cortana hadn't eaten the entire day. When she became focused on a task, she had a tendency to ignore the needs of her organic body. He rummaged around in his sack and took out an MRE.

He walked across camp and dropped the meal in front of Cortana. "Here."

She looked at the package suspiciously until realization dawned on her. "Johnson told you about my petition to transfer," she concluded. "Well, you don't have to worry, Chief, I changed my mind after talking with Keyes. Your position is safe."

His eyebrows furrowed. What was she talking about?

She laughed lowly. "Oh, Johnson didn't tell you the _whole _story. Keyes offered to request Kelly to be assigned to the Alpha team in exchange for you going to the Beta team if I withdrew my petition."

John stood there, stunned.

"You didn't really think Keyes was going to let me go so easily, did you?" she asked, seemingly amused.

"I didn't think he would be so willing to transfer me," John replied candidly.

She shook her head, dismissing his idea. "He wasn't, but he felt like he had no other choice. When it comes to hacking into Forerunner

systems, there's no one better than me. He and Lord Hood care more about the well-being of humanity than your hurt feelings," she said honestly.

"Here," she said, holding out his MRE. "I'll get my own."

"You keep it."

Her eyes softened. Had it gotten to the point where even a simple act of camaraderie was seen as something noble? He shifted uncomfortably. "I owe you an apology for my behavior since your reassignment." It had been the longest sentence he had spoken to her since Reach.

His statement caused her to push away from the desk and look directly at him in disbelief. "I'm sorry, but I think I'm starting to hear things. What did you say?"

He should have known she wasn't going to make this easy for him. After the past several weeks, he couldn't say that he blamed her, but he wasn't going to play the game with her. "You heard me."

She studied him silently for several seconds. "And this was prompted because of my request to transfer?"

she asked, raising her eyebrow.

He nodded.

"Damn, Johnson was right. I should have requested reassignment after we found the first Forerunner piece," she replied. A not-quite uncomfortable silence settled between them until she reached out and touched his arm.

John looked at where her hand rested, but she made no attempt to move it away.

"I'm sure you know this, but there is no one who is harder on me than myself concerning Halsey. I should have seen the signs. I've reviewed her computer logs, her personal records and I still can't figure out why she did what she did. And you know how muchâ€¦" She yawned suddenly, pulling her hand away and covering her mouth.

"When is the last time you slept?"

Her eyes twinkled in the moonlight. "Don't tell me you are suddenly concerned with my well-being."

"I always have been. You know that." He swallowed, uncomfortable with how much he had revealed in those two sentences. He should have never stepped out of his tent, he decided belatedly.

"You are full of surprises tonight, John," she said with a ghost of a smile on her lips.

A familiar yet completely unwelcome warmth spread throughout him at her use of his first name. She hadn't spoken it since their confrontation on the Autumn. He pushed aside the emotion and refused to acknowledge how much he had missed her companionship. "Eat and get some sleep. If the Warthog finds any signs of the database, you'll be alerted."

She ripped open the bag and looked inside. "Yum," she replied with a grimace. But, John noticed, she started eating the food quickly.

He looked at his watch. "Keyes will be back from patrol in four hours. I'll take watch until he returns," John said.

She stood up, taking the bag of food with her. "Thank you, John," she said sincerely.

"You need your sleep like everyone else," he said, suddenly uncomfortable.

"You know what I meant. Don't make me start doubting your observation skills now," she shot back before walking away.

As he sat down and started watching the grainy feed, John knew Johnson was right: he and Cortana did make one hell of a team.

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As an AI, Cortana never was truly asleep; her subroutines were constantly working, her matrix chip constantly active. When she had first integrated into her human host, Cortana had been frustrated by the limits she faced when her physical body was asleep; all of the advantages to being a hybrid were lost. But, as the months went by, Cortana learned to appreciate the down time she had when she was "asleep". It allowed her to think over the days' events or issues without being distracted by the ever pressing demands from High Command. They seemed to believe that she was unavailable during her periods of rest and that was fine with Cortana.

Some days, she used the time to hack into low priority Covenant mainframes. Others, she accessed the UNSC databases to try to determine where the next piece of Forerunner technology was most likely located.

Tonight, it allowed her to think about John.

He had managed to surprise her tonight. She knew Keyes and Johnson would be upset by her reassignment request, but she never considered the idea that John would be so affected by her decision to transfer. While Cortana had hoped that her petition would spur some kind of emotional response from the Spartan, she honestly didn't believe Johnson when he tried to convince her that John would be bothered by her request.

But, he had been affected. Since she had walked away from him and into the sanctuary of her tent, she had analyzed his actions repeatedly--the offering of an MRE, the reluctant admission of his concern for her, the apology--which led her to one startling conclusion.

She had underestimated his feelings towards her.

And Cortana hated being taken off-guard.

She shouldn't have been surprised, though. After everything that they had gone through, experienced together, she knew that she was closer

to John than anyone, even his Spartan counterparts. That was why he had been so harsh to her, she knew. He allowed himself to be emotionally invested in her. And his punishment on himself for allowing that to happen had become her own.

But now, armed with the evidence of his recent actions, Cortana knew he was ready to move on. She didn't think things between the two of them were going to be smooth -and certainly nothing like they were before the attack on Reach- but she sensed the John was sincere in his desire to try to make things work.

That would have to be enough for now.

19. Full Circle: Part 3

****Updated (3/12): Author Notes: No major edits for this section.**

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><p>Four hours later, Cortana rolled out of bed and quickly folded the blankets on the cot. She made the short walk across the tent and grabbed new clothes, grateful that Keyes was agreeable to the idea of them not having to be in standard uniform during the dig. As she was pulling her tank shirt over her head, the Warthog's sensors sounded in her matrix.<p>

It had found something.

She quickly left her tent, grabbing her sunglasses on the way out. As she put them on, she saw Keyes walking in the direction of his tent. "We've hit the jackpot," she called out.

Cortana knew he was tired, but his exhaustion didn't keep him from grimly smiling. "It's about time."

The two of them walked up to the laptop. John quickly slid out of her way, allowing her to pull up the Warthog's data so that they could see the information. The captain walked up to her, his shadow casting over the laptop screen.

"What have we got?"

"It appears to be another global database," Cortana replied as she accessed the data, excitement entering into her voice. "If the calculations from the Warthog are correct, it could be the largest data collection of Forerunner technology that we have found."

"Good work, Cortana," Keyes said sincerely. He turned to John who was waiting expectantly. "Suit up, Chief. Johnson and I will take care of camp. We've got some digging to do."

They were ready in less than an hour. Camp had been broken down, casual clothes had been exchanged for their formal uniforms, supplies had been stashed in the transport.

John approached the three of them, wearing his armor, holding his helmet in his hands. "I'm ready, sir," he said to Keyes.

He looked far more comfortable in the one-of-a-kind suit, Cortana observed. She knew if John had his way, he would always be able to wear his MJOLNIR armor. But, as she had repeatedly reminded him, the power demands were much too high for that to ever become a possibility.

"All right, let's load up."

Cortana looked at the Elephant with a frown. For a Subterranean Excavating Pod Ship, it was perfectly acceptable. But no matter how steady the vessel in front of her was, Cortana would always be uneasy. She hated deep underground travel, but it was the only way to reach the ruins while being undetected by the Covenant. She closed her eyes briefly before taking a step towards the ship.

The ship, made for a six-man crew, didn't have much in terms of space. There was a small cargo bay which housed the Warthog, a small med bay and a bridge. As they stepped onto the bridge, she noticed with some amusement that John stood at attention until Keyes took a seat in the command chair.

"It's going to take ninety-five minutes to reach the LZ," Cortana announced as she sat at the tiny control center, pushing away the feelings of claustrophobia. She was fine. The oxygen levels in the transport had enough air for nearly two months, she reminded herself. She would not be buried alive.

Keyes nodded, pulling out his pipe. "Thanks, Cortana."

She nodded as she started the burrowing sequence. As the ship turned nose-side down and started digging, she silently said goodbye to the sun as the light faded away.

The first hour passed in relative silence; each of them was preparing themselves for the sight that was going to be waiting for them. They knew from experience that the ground would be littered with skeletons and debris, the walls covered in centuries-old blood and gore. No one knew what caused the near-worldwide extermination of the humans, the Forerunners, several centuries ago but Cortana was determined to figure out what happened.

"Are you doing alright?"

The question was barely more than a concerned rumble coming from behind her ear.

She turned to him, hiding a frown. He knew about her claustrophobia, of course. "I'm fine," she softly reassured him.

>It still seemed strange for her to sense concern from him after so long.<p>

"Good," he answered, pleased. He studied her for a second before asking, "Did you take them yet?"

She knew exactly what he was talking about and she was not interested talking about it. "No." Her answer was firm.

"Cortana-"

She shook her head emphatically. "They slow me down too much. When we get to the database, I want to work as fast as I can. We were on the surface far too long already."

John, however, was unconvinced by her argument. "Blacking out because of a migraine will slow you down too," he countered.

Though she and Halsey had tried to determine all of the side effects the linking process between her and John would create, they hadn't been able to predict them all. When John was in his MJOLNIR armor for extended periods of time with the neural link activated above fifty percent, Cortana suffered intense, debilitating migraines. Despite their best efforts, Cortana and the techs at ONI were unable to prevent the headaches from happening.

They did manage to create a drug cocktail for Cortana that limited the pain, but at a cost. Her neural link to her host body was severely diminished and her operating functions were only able to function at eighty percent of their capacity.

"Don't make me get Keyes involved."

She crossed her arms and glared at him. "I think I liked you better when you ignored me all the time." She noted his set jaw. He wasn't going to give in. She cursed his ability to be as stubborn as she was. "Fine, but I'm only taking a half-dose."

"That's good enough," he agreed as Keyes made his way back to the front of the cabin. John nodded to his commanding officer before leaving the bridge.

"Do I want to ask what happened between the two of you?" Keyes asked, chewing on the end of his pipe. "I haven't seen him this talkative since your first mission on the Autumn."

"Were you eavesdropping, sir?" Cortana asked, slightly amused.

"It's my ship. I can listen in on whatever conversations I want," he replied.

"He apologized," she said simply. "And I think thanks to Johnson's meddling, he finally got the clue that I'm not going to turn on the UNSC like Halsey did."

She watched as he closed his eyes, as if trying to hide from her words. There was no mistaking the fact that Keyes took Halsey's betrayal as badly as John.

"No, you're not Catherine," Keyes murmured. "Though you certainly have some of her tenacity."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Cortana said lightly. It was a dangerous slope when people started talking about the similarities between her and Halsey. Most people assumed that because she was created from her cloned brain that Cortana would be exactly like her. But, as her matrix chip was being formatted, the inclusion of other outside influences such as the UNSC database, including all personnel logs and records, allowed Cortana to establish her own unique personality.

"Depends on who you ask," laughed Keyes uncomfortably.

"Here," John said, disrupting the awkwardness that threatened to settle over the cabin. He held out the syringe for her to take.

"Thanks," Cortana said dryly as she grabbed it from his hand. She pulled her hair away from the neural lace and injected the liquid in the back of her neck. "Happy now?"

"Yes."

Cortana felt her processes slow down as the medicine began to kick in. "Well, at least one of us is."

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Thirty minutes later, Cortana landed the vessel at the entrance of the ancient base. Due to the instability of the structure, the ship was unable to go any further into the ruins.

After the Elephant settled on the ground, Keyes stood up and faced John. "According to Cortana, the primary power supply is in the east quadrant. If she's going to be able to access the entire database, we're going to need it working. You need to get that up and running ASAP."

"Understood," the Spartan said.

He turned to Cortana. "After they get the power working, I want you to get that information as fast as you can. Once we activate the Forerunner systems, it will act like a beacon for the Covenant. I'd like to get the hell out of here before they show up."

The AI understood the risks. If the Covenant located them they would be outnumbered and outgunned, a dangerous combination, even for the Alpha Team. Cortana nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Johnson, you need to stay with Cortana while the Chief searches the area for any Forerunner technology that the boys back home can study," Keyes ordered.

"You've got it," Johnson said as he tucked a cigar in his vest pocket.

"Dismissed."

Cortana turned back to the console and tapped in a few commands. She had several subroutines monitoring the area with the Elephants's sensors. She did not want to be caught off-guard if the Covenant did manage to find them. Satisfied that with the data trickling into her matrix, she turned away from the controls and made her way to the back of the ship.

While the others had already disembarked, John stood next to the loading ramp with a flak jacket in his hand.

"Is this really necessary?" Cortana grumbled as she took the protective gear from him.

"Yes."

She knew that it was, but it didn't mean she enjoyed the feeling of the restrictive vest over her body. Cortana slung the jacket over her shoulder and slid her other arm through. She zipped the jacket up and looked at John with a scowl.

He handed her the pistol and looked her over, apparently satisfied. The two of them started walking down the ramp together before he turned to her slightly. "Be careful."

She was tempted to tease him, but she knew he was being serious. Even without the threat of the Covenant finding them, being this far underground, in these ruins, was dangerous. They had already lost most of the Gamma team when the subterranean structure collapsed on them three weeks ago.

"You too," she said sincerely. As they approached the rest of their team, she opened a comm channel. "Don't miss me too much."

He didn't reply, like she expected.

She walked up to Johnson, who was carrying his assault rifle. "Ready?" she asked.

"I'm always ready," he replied good-naturedly.

She pulled out a wide-beam flashlight as Johnson turned on the small light attached to his rifle. Even with the extra light and her enhanced vision, they were going to have to be slow and careful when they made their way through the ruins.

"Good luck," Keyes said, watching the two teams make their way to the destination.

The two of them started making their way east, towards the Warthog's location. The smell of dust and death filled the air around them. It was expected, but it didn't bother Cortana any less than it did at the other sites.

"You ever wonder what happened?" Johnson asked as they stepped around the remains of a long-dead Forerunner. "How the human population nearly was wiped out five hundred years ago?"

It was the one piece of the puzzle that Cortana was eager to find out. If only she could figure out what had happened to the Forerunners, then, she might be able to understand what happened and, maybe, use that to the UNSC's advantage to fight the Covenant.

"Of course, Johnson," Cortana answered as she cautiously stepped over a large piece of rubble.

"You have some theories, don't you?"

He knew that she did, but she suspected his interest in her ideas had something to do with the idea of keeping her mind off the fact they were, in fact, in a very narrow passageway nearly one hundred yards underground. She didn't call him on his protectiveness, however. Over the past several weeks, especially since her reinstatement into Alpha Team, he had become a close friend to her.

"Well, I don't ascribe to the popular idea that it was a nuclear war that destroyed humanity. None of the Forerunner sites have reported having any abnormal radiation readings. Something happened to the humans, but I think it's something much more sinister than a few nukes," Cortana replied.

"Some people think aliens came to Earth. Nearly wiped people out," Johnson commented as they stepped through the hole in the wall the Warthog created.

Cortana snorted. "Aliens, huh? Now that's an interesting theory." She grimaced as she saw the blood-covered wall in front of her. They were getting close to the center of the complex. "But, if it's all the same, I'll keep my ideas to myself until I have some data backing me up."

A silence fell between the two of them as the remains and the centuries-old carnage appeared with an increasing frequency. Whatever happened to the Forerunners had been brutal; all of the sites the UNSC had found had given a gruesome, silent testimony to the unknown past.

As they climbed a steep pile of rubble, she offered a hand to Johnson to help him up. The increased elevation allowed them to look at the expansive room ahead of them. "Damn," he muttered.

Cortana wordlessly agreed with his assessment of the view in front of them. In front of them were dozens of skeletons, each one armed with some kind of weapon, whether knife or gun. Several had killed each other; Cortana could see the blade of a knife embedded into the ribcage of at least three of the deceased Forerunners. Others, it seemed, appeared to be hiding. A group of seven skeletons were huddled in the corner, as if they were trying to get away from something.

"Come on," she said, leading them away from the gruesome scene in front of them. "We're wasting time here."

Ten minutes later, after walking and crawling over the rubble, they reached the control room. The room had been abandoned, much to both of their relief. Clearing the Forerunner remains was not something Cortana wanted to do after the last site.

"Now we wait," she said, standing in front of a console.

"How's the Chief doing? Sleeping on the job, probably," Johnson seemed more relaxed now that the horrific reminders of what had happened were no longer in his line of vision.

She looked away for a second as she boosted the neural link between her and John. "He's almost there. Unfortunately, he ran into a couple of collapsed tunnels, so he had to backtrack, but he's on course now. Once John accesses the console I'll have to infiltrate the power grid and we'll be set."

"Nothing like being in two places at once," he quipped.

She nodded, allowing herself a brief smile. "It does have its advantages," she replied.

Several minutes later, John reached the control room. She boosted the signal as she allocated more of her subroutines to transfer to John's armor to hack into the system. The pressure in her brain was starting to build, but she pushed aside her discomfort.

Despite her effort to conceal her pain, Johnson stepped next to her. "You doing ok?" Johnson asked, concerned. "The Chief will kick my ass if you pass out on me."

Cortana nodded, dismissing his concern. "I'm fine. I'm sure you had a worse headache during your last hangover."

"Hey, no one told me how much alcohol was in that bootleg crap Buck gave us after that last mission," Johnson replied defensively.

"Trusting Buck was your first mistake," she said as her subroutines hacked into the system. She let out a long breath as the lights filtered on. "There we go."

She stumbled slightly as she transferred the subroutines back to her matrix. Damn, she thought, annoyed at her sluggish response time. The next time John pressed her to take her meds, she would show him how stubborn she could be.

Johnson put his hand on her shoulder. "You alright?"

She nodded, her head clearing. "I'll be fine." Without wasting any time, she walked up to the main console and transferred herself into the system. "Just watch my back," she said to Johnson via a comm channel.

"Yes, ma'am."

Immediately, she knew this database was different than the one they had found at the previous site. While the security system was nearly non-existent in that system, this one had several billion layers of encryption coding. It would take Cortana more time to get the data than she had anticipated.

Still, she thought as she sifted her way through the encryption, there must have been something here that the Forerunners thought was valuable.

It took her nearly three minutes to break through the security code, but when she finally had access to the data, she was not disappointed. There were several million quattuordecillions of files. She started running off several thousand subroutines to sort and filter the information that was pouring into her matrix.

There was enough information in there to keep her busy for weeks. She wanted to access all the files as they transferred into her data pathways, but she knew with her operating at lower levels, it would slow the transfer process too much. Only the files that her subroutines flagged as significant would be reviewed before they returned to the _Autumn_. The rest, she thought with a wave of frustration, would have to wait.

Nearly two hours passed and Cortana was finally nearing the end of

the transfer. Just as she was about to access a secured data file called halo, the proximity sensors on the _Autumn _were activated.

The Covenant had found them.

20. Full Circle: Part 4

Updated (3/12): Author Notes: No major edits. :D

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><p>It was taking longer than expected.<p>

John questioned whether or not he should have pushed Cortana to taking her meds before dismissing the notion. After Cairo, he made a promise to himself that she wouldn't get hurt again due to their link.

She was still in the Forerunner system; John had been occasionally reaching over their open link to monitor her progress. It was disconcerting for him to see through her perspective as she was infiltrating the system. All he saw were trillions of lines of codes scrolling at impossible speeds, both in the familiar Unicode used by the UNSC and the binary code of the Forerunners. Despite her slowed speed, it was unfeasible for him to keep up with the amount of data she was accumulating.

He turned his attention to the shielding mechanism he had found while rummaging through the ruins. While there were plenty of corpses down here, it appeared that most of the artifacts had been taken. He wondered, briefly, if the Covenant hadn't already found another way into this complex.

It would be one more time the UNSC had fallen behind the Covenant.

"_John_," Cortana said, her voice cutting through the eerie silence that surrounded the ruins, "_we've got Covenant inbound. I'm detecting a half dozen landing pods. ETA is in ten minutes_."

"Understood. Are you out of the system yet?"

"_No, not yet. I'm going through the last of the files now..._" she said, her voice trailing off.

John frowned at her uncharacteristically distracted response. "Are you going to be?" he pressed.

Immediately, he knew something was wrong. It had taken her just too long to respond to his question. She was acting almostâ€|glitchy.

"_Not before the Covenant arrive_," she finally answered. "_I will contact you when my objective has been completed._" She terminated the comm channel abruptly.

Then, to his shock, the familiar hum he associated with Cortana

completely faded from his mind. He hadn't felt that emptiness sinceâ€¦No, he wouldn't let himself think about what happened at Panama. He tried to reestablish the connection with her via their neural link, but he saw nothing but blackness.

She had locked him out.

Instantly, his suspicion reintroduced itself to him. He should have never trusted her. He should have never apologized. He should have never-

"_Chief_", Keyes' voice cut into his thoughts. "_Protocol GOLD MINE has been activated in Cortana's matrix_." Instantly, John froze. That would explain Cortana's recent change in behavior. A wave of guilt at his quick-too quick-return to distrust washed over him.

"_You need to make sure that generator stays online until Cortana gets out of the system,_" the captain ordered.

"Understood, sir." He turned around and made his way back to the control room. It was standard procedure for the Covenant to find the power source and cut it off, preventing them from accessing the Forerunner databases. But John's concern was deeper than having to worry about fighting in the dark; if Cortana was in the still in the system when they power supply was destroyed, she would be stranded in the system.

That was not going to happen.

He made it back to the room with less than a minute to spare. The earth around him shook and the ceiling above his head began to crumble at the pods' trajectory. He tucked himself in a darkened corner of the room. He would take any advantage he would get. Fighting a half-dozen Elites alone was going to be difficult, even for him.

"Cortana, are you out of the system?"

She didn't respond.

He knew with GOLD MINE in effect, he was on his own. Cortana wouldn't open the communication channel until she had completed her mission.

The first pod broke through the ceiling, pulling John's thoughts away from Cortana. He held his assault rifle steady as the first Elite came out of its transport. Before he had time to aim his plasma rifle, John fired a quick burst at him, hitting him squarely in the chest.

He barely had time to sprint across the room and grab the plasma grenades off the fallen Elite before another pod came crashing through. He slid under the console and whipped around to face his would-be attacker.

This time, however, the Elite was ready for John's attack. Two shots were fired before John was able to fire a round. He rolled out of the way, dodging the bolts of plasma. He tumbled to the side and shot in the direction of the Elite. He managed to hit the Elite, but the Covenant soldier was not out of the fight; he tossed a plasma grenade

in the Chief's direction.

Left with no other choice, John charged towards the Elite. He slammed his gauntlet in his chin, shattering his jaw. As the hulking soldier staggered backwards, John fired two quick shots to his chest with his spare pistol.

He pressed himself against the wall closest to the power console. Despite his effort to control the situation, four more pods came crashing overhead. As he was about to activate the plasma grenade in his left hand, a familiar cool presence entered his mind.

"_Chief, the ship will be disembarking in five minutes. Please return there immediately_."

This time there was no mistaking the stiff, almost mechanical way she was speaking to him, a side effect of the protocol being in effect.

"Understood," he replied evenly.

John frowned as he took in the position of the Covenant. The Elites were not idle during his brief exchange with Cortana. They had surrounded him.

He was trapped.

"Your end is near, vermin," one of them snarled.

The others around him laughed.

John was left with limited options to try to survive the next thirty seconds. He flicked his gaze to the gaps in the ceiling. If his aim was just right, he might be able to cause a collapse and bury the Elites alive. It would take luck and an exact location for his target, but he could do it with Cortana's help.

He opened the private comm link. "Cortana, I need you to give me the exact location where I need to throw this grenade to cause the ceiling to collapse," John said urgently as the Elite closest to him activated his energy sword.

He hoped the GOLD MINE protocol would allow her to make the calculation. He doubted he could figure out the position on his own. Fortunately, she responded quickly. "_I have marked the position on your HUD. Please, remember, Chief, that your throw needs to be precise. If you are off by a centimeter_â€"

He knew the risks. If he missed, he would be buried alive too. "Understood," he said, ending the channel.

Without wasting a second, he tossed the plasma grenade at the position she had marked. The Elites around him grunted as they realized what he was attempting to do. John wasted no time to watch their reaction. He took advantage of their distraction and pushed his way through the Elite furthest away from his position and ran towards the door.

Perhaps, if it had been a group of grunts in the room with him, he would have been able to escape. But, the highly trained Elites

weren't as easily as distracted. Before John had a chance to flee, one of them fired his pistol at the Spartan. John staggered at the impact, but pushed himself forward.

It was that one misstep that would prevent his successful escape. The mouth of the entrance was less than three meters away when the high pitch sound filled the room. A sinking feeling settled over him as he realized he wasn't going to make it out of the room before the grenade detonated.

He felt the explosion before he was able to faintly register the sound of the room around him collapsing. Blackness filled his vision as the rocks came crashing around him. Consciousness slipped from him, despite his best efforts to stay awake.

His luck had run out.

21. Full Circle: Part 5

****Updated (3/12): Author Notes: No major edits for this section.**

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><p>A switch had been flicked.<p>

Protocol GOLD MINE was in full effect.

As Cortana's subroutines were sifting through the massive amount of data, one of them found a suspiciously familiar looking set of symbols. She began going through the enormous amount of mission logs in her matrix and found that, yes, a similar set of symbols had been seen by John several months before they had been assigned to work with each other.

At that influx of information, her alpha-priority programming pushed aside and the protocol was implemented. She had to assimilate the meaning of the symbols immediately.

Protocol dictated that she needed to contact Captain Keyes and inform him of the situation. "Captain Keyes, protocol GOLD MINE is in effect."

"_Damn, so this trip was worth it_." He paused for a second. "_You know that the Covenant are coming, right_?"

Of course she did, but it didn't matter if the Covenant were coming. It didn't matter if Johnson died protecting her. It didn't matter if the Master Chief was sacrificed while trying to keep the generator online. The only thing that did matter was deciphering the meaning of the symbols.

"Yes, sir. I will be remotely activating defense pattern 'Delta Echo' immediately. The ship systems should be able to eliminate any Covenant threat until I am finished here. Please contact Spartan-117 with orders to hold the generator room until my objective is complete," she commanded.

"_I'll take care of it, Cortana. You find what you need to. Keyes out._"

With that out of the way, she quickly accessed the information stored in her storage buffer and found that the symbols found were remarkably close to some known characters from the ancient Athenian alphabet. She ran a cross-analysis of them two and found that over eighty percent of the symbols matched. She processed it through her translation software. It took less than five seconds for her to decipher the meaning of the words.

In the mouth of the cave lies the key to the world. The waters lap the land that is parched.

There was only one place in the world that could be: Australia.

She paused three full seconds before her subroutines started racing. No one, not even the Covenant had dared to travel to the island that had been ground zero for the humans' demise five hundred years ago. But, if she understood the translation correctly-and there was no reason why she wasn't-this would lead them to a safe entrance to access the cursed land.

Protocol dictated that she needed to return to the _Autumn _and report the information to High Command immediately. Without waiting another millisecond, she planted a virus that would delete all of the data in the network which would prevent the Covenant from deciphering the data.

As she transferred herself out of the Forerunner system, she accessed the myriad of information filtering through her systems that had been filtered by her active protocol: the Covenant had reached their location while the Master Chief was trying to hold the control room on his own.

Now that she was out of the system, there was no reason for the Spartan to remain in the generator room. He needed to return to the ship before they left him behind. "Chief, the ship will be disembarking in five minutes. Please return there immediately," she said stiffly.

There was a long pause. Finally, he spoke. "Understood."

Later, there would be time for her to review her actions, to feel guilty for her coldness towards the Spartan. But, right now, she had one solitary focus: to make sure the information got to the UNSC. The Master Chief's feelings, even his life, were acceptably expendable, according to her protocol.

"Sergeant Johnson," she said, turning towards him. "We must return to the Elephant now."

"I'm right behind you, ma'am," he said formally.

Before she walked out of the room, she removed her pistol from her holster. There was a forty-three percent chance that the Covenant would be blocking their way to the ship. If they increased their speed by twenty percent, then the chances lowered by eighty-three percent. Quickly, she climbed over the rubble and rock.

Information from the Elephants's sensors entered her matrices. Two Ghosts were on their way to the ship's position and another half dozen burrowing pods were closing in on their position. It would be close, but they would make it back to the Elephant before they had a chance to attack.

She looked at Johnson who was looking at her strangely. But, like the trained soldier he was, he spoke none of his concerns aloud.

"Follow me," she instructed before breaking out into a run. They may survive if the rubble collapsed around them; they wouldn't survive a direct attack from a Ghost.

As they were making their way through the narrow tunnel, her comm channel was opened. "_Cortana, I need you to give me the exact location where I need to throw this grenade to cause a collapse._"

Briefly, she considered telling the Chief that she didn't have the time to calculate such a trajectory. But, her beta-priority command wouldn't allow her to do such a thing. If she could do something to insure the safety of the Chief, she needed to do so.

She accessed the video feed from his visor, noticing the Elites that were circling around him. But that was not her primary concern. She saw the holes in the ceiling and calculated the exact location he needed to throw the plasma grenade.

>"I have marked the position on your HUD. Please, remember, Chief that your throw needs to be precise. If you are off by a centimeterâ€" "<p>

"_Understood_."

The channel ended.

As they rounded the corner, the ship came into view. She sprinted up the loading ramp and stood in front of Captain Keyes who was looking as expectantly.

"Did you find what you were looking for?"

"Yes, sir," she replied confidently.

"So, this mission is a success?"

Cortana frowned, briefly as her alpha-priority and the protocol clashed with each other. She couldn't give a clear response to the captain's comment. "I have not heard from Spartan-117 since his attempt to escape the Elites in the generator room," she reported as she activated the Elephant's engines. "We need to get out of here, sir. Spartan-117 will not be able to reach the ship's position before the Covenant do."

Her voice was stiff, emotionless.

Keyes frowned. Johnson sputtered. Keyes looked torn for a moment, no doubt weighing the risk of staying here longer than necessary.

"Negative, Cortana. We're going to wait until the Chief gets back

aboard," Keyes said firmly.

Cortana hesitated for a second as she tried to contend with the conflicting commands. "You do realize that your interference with the GOLD MINE protocol will more than likely result in a court martial?" she asked, her voice still showing none of its usual warmth.

Finally, Johnson had enough. "What the hell is going on here?" the sergeant demanded. He faced Cortana. "Since when is leaving the Chief behind acceptable?"

Keyes held up his hand, quieting Johnson. "It's not Cortana's fault. You can blame her new found dedication on ONI." He looked back at Cortana. "I'm willing to face that court martial. Get the Chief back aboard. That's a direct order."

Reluctantly, she tapped the controls. "I could send the Warthog to the Chief's location. If he regains consciousness, then he might be able to get out of there alive," she suggested.

"Do it," Keyes commanded. "Then run operation protocol: ANARCHY."

She paused for a moment as her subroutines scrambled to find the obscure protocol. Within two seconds, she found the command and implemented it.

And she was herself again.

All restrictions put into place from the oppressive protocol were suspended. She looked at Keyes, her eyebrow raised. "Sir?"

His shoulders lowered and he let out a breath. "Just something Catherine told me when she implemented the protocol," he said, relieved. "She planted the code in case something like this happened. She was always against any protocol overwriting your primary commands. She trusted you to be able make the right assessment of a situation and react accordingly."

He paused, looking at her. "I trust you too, Cortana."

She nodded. "Thank you, sir."

He nodded. "Let's just keep this between the Alpha Team."

Johnson grinned. "Aye, sir."

Before she could reply, the Warthog transmitted a signal to her; it was arriving at John's position.

With her new found freedom, she accessed the vital signs from John's armor. He was still unconscious due to a concussion. Four ribs were cracked, his Achilles heel was torn and there was significant blood loss. Cortana knew if it was anyone else, she doubted they would survive.

But, this was John, she reminded herself. He made a habit of breaking all of the laws of probabilities.

"Chief, come on, you've got to wake up," she said via their private comm channel.

His vital signs were unchanged.

"Come on, Spartan, don't make me doubt your luck now," she said, getting slightly panicked. She knew if he didn't respond soon, they would have no other option but to leave him behind. "We need to go. The Covenant are about to reach us."

He still didn't respond.

"Please, John. I can't-" she struggled admitting her weakness. "John, you have got to wake up."

"Cortana?"

She let out a shaky breath. His voice was slurred, his vitals were weak, but he was responsive. "John, the Warthog is headed your way. Can you move at all?"

"Yes," he gritted.

"The Warthog will be at your position in ten seconds. When it gets there, you're going to have to hang on." She bit her lip. "It isn't going to be the smoothest ride, but you'll make it out of here alive."

"Understood," he slurred.

She monitored the Warthog's progress through its video feed; John's visual output had been damaged in the crash. She frowned as he came into view. A large beam with a half a meter from his spine. If he had made one less step...

No, now was not the time for second-guessing. Now was the time to get John back to the ship before the Covenant arrived.

"Now John!"

She watched as he grabbed the task-like arm in front of him and threw himself on top of the bulky machine.

"Hang on!" she said as she turned the Warthog around and pushed the engine's to their limit.

It wasn't going to be enough. Even if John's shield's protected him from the hurling rocks and debris, the Elephant would be in the firing range of the Ghosts for nearly twenty seconds before he made it back on board. She raised the shields to maximum power, ignoring the niggle of the protocol to leave him behind.

John was going to make it back on board.

Finally, as the Warthog came within a hundred yards of the ship, Cortana said, "Lowering boarding ramp now. Johnson, John's vitals are weak. I'm going to need you to get him into a medical bay until we clear-"

A shot rocked the cabin. "Direct hit on the port side. Shields

holding at 82 percent," she said, holding on to the control panel. Several tense seconds passed before she announced, "The Warthog and the Chief are on board." She did her best to not let the worry enter into her voice.

"I've got him," Johnson assured her before walking off the bridge.

Keyes sat in the command chair. "Punch it," he ordered.

22. Full Circle: Part 6

****Updated (3/12): Author Notes: No major edits for this section.**

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* * *

><p>Cortana had been right, John sluggishly thought as he released his grip of the Warthog, it was certainly one hell of a ride back to the ship. He was fairly certain his right shoulder had become dislocated during the ride, though the drug cocktail that was rushing through his system hid any signs of pain.<p>

He took off his helmet and set it on the ground. It was useless in its current condition; the outside of the glass had been shattered when the debris kicked up from the ground. His armor had taken a beating both from the collapse and the ride; John didn't know if it would ever be able to be fully repaired.

He knew he had several broken ribs and his Achilles heel, the same one that had torn months ago when he first met Cortana, was ripped apart. Based on the grogginess he felt, he knew he had a severe concussion.

John would be relieved when they were able to get on base where they could tend to his injuries properly, but, for now, the biofoam was doing its part and he was certain he could put weight on his right foot and he would have to ignore the headache.

With a determined step, he started making his way to the bridge. Before he could get far, the ground beneath him shook violently.

They were under attack.

Once the floor stabilized, John continued down the corridor, leaning on the wall for extra support. He needed to get to the bridge to see what was going on.

"And where do you think you're going?" Johnson asked, coming down the hallway with a scowl.

"To the bridge," he evenly answered.

The sergeant shook his head. "No, you aren't. Cortana said you got pretty banged up out there. I'm supposed to make sure that you get down to the med bay."

"I'll be fine," he replied as he continued walking towards the bridge.

"Stubborn fool," Johnson grumbled, but made no other argument to try to stop him. "Just remember, it's your ass she's going to kick, not mine."

Another tremor shook the ship.

"I'll take my chances," John answered as they walked down the corridor together.

When John stepped onto the bridge, he walked into a scene of barely-controlled chaos. Keyes was frantically tapping at the weapon controls, Cortana was moving back and forth between consoles. Smoke was coming from one of the power couplings.

"Couldn't stay away from the excitement, huh?" Cortana asked wryly without turning to face him.

Despite his injuries, John felt relieved at the playfulness in her voice. Though the time right before he got crushed was a bit muddled, he remembered her coldness towards him.

The cabin shook tumultuously as another bolt of plasma hit the Scorpion. John braced himself on the console closest to him, dodging another burst of smoke coming from another busted coupling.

"Direct hit on the port side. Shields to twenty percent," Johnson announced as he hopped onto another control panel. "Another couple of hits like that and we're toast."

"Return fire," Keyes ordered.

John watched Cortana tap the console to unleash a barrage of bullets in the direction of the Covenant battle cruiser.

"Minimal damage," Johnson reported.

"We're not going to be able to outgun them," Keyes muttered, pulling out his pipe. John watched as he slowly down briefly, considering his options. Finally, he walked up to Cortana and put his hand on the back of her chair.

"I've already got the _Autumn_ heading to our position. I should be able to collapse the structure and bury the ships with the new schematics that I found," Cortana offered as the holographic layout appeared on the main view screen.

"Do it."

"Understood, sir."

She looked at John for the first time. John could only imagine the sight he was: blood was splattered on his face, his normally pristine armor was crushed and filthy. "The techs at home are going to kill you," she commented offhandedly.

He didn't have time to answer before she spoke again. "If I were you, I'd take a seat. This will make the Warthog ride seem like a walk in

the park," she warned.

He ignored her advice and strengthened his hold on the console. He would be ready for whatever she had in mind.

"Hold on." The ship violently shook as it plowed into a beam in the center of the main room. Three shots from the main canon fired. John watched as the ceiling began collapsing in front of them.

"Cortana-

"Not now."

She pushed the engines forward as hard as they could go. "Engine output at 112 percent," she unnecessarily announced. "It's gonna get rough."

Suddenly, she pulled up on the control stick, causing the ship to point straight up in the air. The centripetal force was pushing against them. Despite his grip, John felt his fingers slip and he slammed against the wall of the cabin.

The wound on his head that had recently stopped bleeding ripped open. Blood dripped down his forehead as black spots entered his vision. His head roared in protest at its mistreatment.

"You ok?" she asked on the private comm.

"Yeah," he replied slowly. His movements were sluggish, his thoughts were even more muddled than they were before.

"Maybe next time you'll take my suggestion and take a seat," she replied dryly.

He didn't respond, but he awkwardly lowered himself into one of the too-small seats in the cabin, focusing on remaining conscious.

"Two Covenant cruisers destroyed," she said to Keyes with a satisfied grin.

Keyes lit his pipe. "Now let's get out of here before the rest of those bastards figure out what we did to their ships."

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"It's not perfect, but it will have to do," Cortana said as she took a step back and examined John's forehead.

Since she was the closest to a doctor they had on the ship, it fell in her jurisdiction to tend to John's injuries. His ribs had been mended, but they would still be sore for several hours. The gash in his head required seven stitches which were covered by the gauze she had found in a ship's med kit.

His armor had been placed in the automatic repair facility that was on board the ship. It would be able to fix most of the damage done to the suit, but it would take Cortana a few hours to completely repair it. They were lucky that the irreparable parts—the HUD, the power

supply, her matrix chipâ€"were spared in the collapse.

"Give me your hand," she instructed.

He did as he was told and gently set his hand on top of her palm.

She ran the instrument over his crushed digits. "I'm still going to have to wrap them. The damage isâ€|extensive. But," she said as she pasted on a smile, "if anyone could expect a full recovery, it will be you."

She still felt awkward around him, still blaming herself for not being strong enough to override the protocol, to fight the demand to leave John behind.

"Cortana."

She reluctantly raised her gaze to his pensive brown eyes.

"Captain Keyes told me about what happened. About the GOLD MINE protocol."

"Then you can understand my frustration," she said, uncharacteristically embarrassed. As human as she appeared, she was still a machine, run by protocols and data pathways. There would always be someone who would be able to program her, to do what they wanted.

She turned away from him and grabbed the bandages from the metal table. "You know, never once have I resented being an AI. I can think in ways that humans can only dream of. I have hacked into the toughest Covenant systems. But today?" she shook her head, facing him. "I have never felt more like a machine before in my life."

He grabbed her free wrist with his good hand, stilling her movements. "You are as human as any of us."

She pulled away and started wrapping his fingers.

Several quiet seconds passed.

"Would you have done it? Left me behind?" she whispered, locking her gaze on his familiar brown eyes.

A thick silence settled over the room. It wasn't fair to put him on the spot, she realized. Emotional leaps and bounds were not his strong points.

"Yes."

She closed her eyes as the impact of his answer weighed on her. Of course he would let her go. He was the consummate soldier. He was a Spartan. He was-

"But, I would come back for you."

She jerked her head up and opened her eyes, surprised. "That almost sounds like a promise."

"It was." John shifted his weight and Cortana knew he was done with that part of their conversation. He looked back down to his half-wrapped hand. "What activated the GOLD MINE protocol?" he asked, changing subjects.

"This," she said, activating the screen behind her, as she continued wrapping his hand.

She watched as he looked at the unfamiliar symbols scroll across the screen momentarily before the translation and her assessment appeared.

He sharply turned away from the screen to look directly in her eyes. "Australia?"

She nodded once. "Yes." She released her hold of his hand, letting it drop away from her. "But, this is what I can't figure out."

A new cluster of data appeared on the screen. One word stuck out amongst them the most. "Halo? What's that?"

"I don't know," Cortana admitted, turning towards the screen, "but something tells me that we're going to learn plenty about it soon enough."

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